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Boundaries as Relations. Georg Simmel's Relational Theory of Boundaries

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The concept of a boundary is **extremely important in all relationships** of human beings to one another, even though its significance is not always a sociological one (Simmel, 1997, p. 142, my emphasis).

(W)e are bounded in every direction, and we are bounded in no direction (Simmel, 2010, p. 2

Introduction

Georg Simmel theorized about boundaries, borders, limits (and thresholds) throughout his whole life and oeuvre.¹ The theorization about boundaries is one of the most constant (if not *the* most constant) topic and figure of thought within his oeuvre, if we consider it as a whole. Furthermore, the concept of boundary increased its importance and centrality within the Simmelian oeuvre as time went by, reaching a first milestone in the text 'The Sociology of Space' (GSG 7, p. 132–183; Simmel, 1997, pp. 137–170) and its later revision and inclusion in *Sociology's* ninth chapter on 'Space and the Spatial Ordering of Society' (GSG 11, pp. 687–790) and culminating in Simmel's last and most beautiful work *The View of Life* (1918). (GSG 16, pp. 209–425; Simmel, 2010)

I have differentiated between 'topic' and 'figure of thought,' as boundaries were not always the main subject of Simmel's elucidations when he dealt with them, but a means, i.e. a figure of thought, through which he approached other issues: be it the limits of the forms of association, or of sociology as an emerging discipline; be it of exchange or of the process of constitution of individuality/ies, or even of love and life. In order to think all these different subjects, 'boundaries' are necessary. Relational boundaries that set limits between disciplines, between phenomena, between you and me, between coquetry and provocation, between competition and assault, between life and inert matter. The boundaries we have and the boundaries we are, the boundaries we use, the boundaries we set, and the boundaries we encounter. From our own skin to the frame we design to outline a small universe painted on a canvas: we are beings of boundaries. These two examples are the beginning of a very long list this chapter will explore

and unfold in the forthcoming pages. Thus, the aim of this text is to provide an account of Simmel's relational theorization of boundaries, as creators and markers of proximity and distance, openings and closures.

Theorizing boundaries. The relevance of the concept in Simmel's work

The quote that opens this text shows how Simmel postulated the extreme importance of the concept of boundaries in the human way of relating to the world and to one another. We find in just this one sentence, which is neither particularly long nor complicated (by Simmelian standards), a remarkable amount of information regarding the meaning of the concept of boundaries in Simmel's works. To begin with, Simmel uses the expression 'the concept of'. This is not haphazard. He systematically used this formulation (the concept of/*der Begriff des/der...*) when he sought to highlight the theoretical importance of a particular key concept he was about to introduce or elaborate upon. Thus, in the sentence above, and after making a point about the importance of the concept of boundary as a key explanatory concept, he continued by stating its extreme relevance in all human relations – not only the part of these relations which we could regard under the lens of sociology (following Simmel's proposals for sociology as a discipline) (GSG 5, pp. 52–61). Beyond the limits of this discipline, the concept of a boundary allows the theoretician to think of a fundamental condition of the human beings' manifold ways of being-in-the world, being-part-of-the-world.²

If we compare Simmel's perspective on the concept of boundaries in the quote above (stemming from 'The Sociology of Space') with the perspective he presented in 'Life as Transcendence,' his last written text and the initial chapter of *View of Life*,³ we will rapidly recognize that by the end of his life Simmel did not think that the concept of boundaries was only of extreme importance when considering human relationships to one another, but he had expanded the scope of importance of this concept so as to reach all relations among living beings, and even to the very conceptualization of life itself.

Of course one may argue that the change of emphasis may be due to the fact that our initial quote stems from a text whose intention was to elaborate on space from a sociological perspective along the lines he had already suggested in his essay 'The Problem of Sociology' in 1894 (GSG 11; GSG 5, pp. 52–61).⁴ In contrast, the wider perspective of *View of Life* can be explained by the fact that this latter monograph was neither a sociological book nor a book on sociology, but Simmel's theoretical testament, which he addressed, above all, to philosophy, but whose contributions and elucidations are so deeply transdisciplinary.⁵ However, this hypothetical objection regarding the scope of Simmel's reflection on boundaries cannot be

dismissed without further attention. Many authors have claimed that many of the seeds that flourished in *View of Life* had already been planted by the time *Philosophy of Money* was written (1900/1907) (Harrington & Kemple, 2012; Blumenberg, 2012; Pyyhtinen, 2018; Kemple, 2019a). Despite sharing this view, it is nonetheless important to focus upon two relevant issues in relation to this point: On the one hand, and despite acknowledging and sharing the idea that many of Simmel's life philosophical thoughts were already more or less implicitly present in this prose before 1908, it is necessary to differentiate between a thought that can be read in-between-lines (especially if we know in which direction the author's thoughts evolved afterwards) and a thought that has been fully developed, and argued at length. On the other hand, and viewed from a current perspective, Simmel's thoughts about life, relationality and boundaries beyond human-to-human relationships are of great relevance today, also for sociology (more-than-human sociology), and social theory in more general terms (Pyyhtinen, 2015; Latour, 2005).

Based on the fact that Simmel's theorization of boundaries is developed the widest and at its best in *View of Life*, we should begin our journey through Simmel's (concept of) boundaries with his last work. It is a very conscious decision, for it is in this text where we can see the clearest how Simmel thought about these curious phenomena of boundaries, which are relational par excellence, beyond disciplinary divisions or specificities, in a truly transdisciplinary way before the term and perspective were on the agenda. Boundaries are relations and regulations of relations (formed relations) made visible, sometimes tangible, experienceable, and whose effects mould the further course of the relations out of which its forming stems. Let us now fully focus on Simmel's proposal for theorizing boundaries from a relational perspective. Why do we claim the paradigm of relationality when thinking of boundaries with and through Simmel?

Following Simmel's relational approach, there are no boundaries where nothing resides beyond them. Boundaries are there to mark a 'this side' and a 'that side' of something. They are thus necessarily relational: their being in between this side and that side makes the existence of this side and that side possible. Without the boundary between them, there would be no two sides, but a continuum. Boundaries break continua (temporal, spatial, relational, vital) in order to establish, frame, tame relationships through it. Without boundaries we would not notice, we would not be aware of, these continuities. Without boundaries we would notice nothing in particular, only an undifferentiated chaos which we could not navigate: 'We are continually orienting ourselves, even when we do not employ abstract concepts, to an "over us" and an "under us," to a right and a left, to a more or less, a tighter or looser, a better or worse. The

boundary, above and below, is our means for finding direction in the infinite space of our worlds. We are beings of boundaries, as we are ‘beings of difference’ (*Unterschiedswesen*, GSG11, 1992:312); or ‘differentiating creatures’ as the English translation of ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’ suggests (Simmel, 1997, p. 175); or comparing and contrasting beings as he stated in *Philosophy of Money* (Simmel, 2004, pp. 83 f.). There is an interconnectedness between these assertions. They seek to emphasize how the setting of boundaries between entities, phenomena or qualities that we see in relation to one another allows us to identify them, strengthen the boundaries and establish clearer relations and comparisons among them. But boundaries are not solely external to us. ‘Along with the fact that we *have* boundaries always and everywhere, also we *are* boundaries.’ (Simmel, 2010, p. 1) Throughout our lives, as long as we are alive, we are boundaries to our own existence, which we keep on overcoming and setting anew. We are boundaries to others, we are boundaries in space and time. And sometimes, when we move across political and social spaces, claiming rights and a possibility of living, we are moving boundaries, moving borders. Yet, when dealing with boundaries Simmel does also not refer himself only to orientation in space (also, but not only). His is a much wider understanding of the concept of ‘orientation,’ which justifies the plural use of ‘our worlds:’ worlds of ideas, concepts, places, time, practices, resources, everyday life and liminal moments – the very concept of liminality refers to the necessary boundaries/thresholds between the profane and the sacred, between finite universes of meaning and everyday life (Turner, 1979). All of them are relational worlds in which no relations are possible without boundaries, and no boundaries are possible without relations.

I have claimed that Simmel’s perspective on boundaries is the widest and most complete in *View of Life*. This does not mean however that a certain anthropocentric perspective is gone missing from his prose. Despite the fact that the richness and depth of his thoughts have maintained his contributions relevant and ‘alive’ beyond his own time – they have overcome all boundaries that separate our lives from Simmel’s – Simmel himself was born 1858 and died 1918. He could not write and think like a man of the 21st century. This is relevant to emphasize, although the message itself needs no further clarification, because it is our job and not Simmel’s to take and elaborate on further what we need to think through and theorize what is relevant and necessary for us now. Furthermore, when Simmel, in the very first sentence of ‘Life as Transcendence’ postulates that human beings need boundaries in each and every dimension of their being and behaviour in order to have a position in the world; i.e. in order to be, or in order to be with meaning, he is thereby not excluding that other living beings may need boundaries too. Or that the Anthropocene may be a boundary we may or may not overcome – it will be

overcome, for sure, I am only questioning whether we shall stay at this side or will make it to the other side of this boundary.

On many occasions, what some could view as anthropocentric in Simmel's prose can also be read as humble. He writes from a human perspective, without claiming its exclusive validity, and not even claiming it is the only possible human way of being-in-the world, and seeing/narrating-the-world. Thus, Simmel's claims about the 'human way' are broad and general, allowing many variations, nuances, and explicit inclusions that allow us to overcome explicit and implicit biases of anthropocentrism (see Pyythinen, 2012).

The main claim that Simmel makes regarding boundaries for the human way of inhabiting the world is that without boundaries there is only indeterminacy, no point of orientation, no fixed points (spatial or otherwise) that mark paths or allow trajectories. Fixed points are the result of relations, as are boundaries. In fact, nothing is exempt of being used as a border or boundary in order to mark a limit to be overcome, a position to be established. As we relationally move through existence, we encounter, pick and drop boundaries, which we overcome, or which disappear as new boundaries and new thresholds emerge, which become more meaningful to us than those we let go. Hence, Simmel states the human necessity for boundaries, and the human independence of any concrete boundary:

(A)lthough the boundary as such is necessary, yet every single specific boundary can be stepped over, every fixity can be displaced, every enclosure can be burst, and every such act, of course, finds or creates a new boundary (Simmel, 2010, p. 2).

No boundary will stand forever, but there will be boundaries *at least* as long as humanity as we know it exists. Furthermore, and here Simmel clearly overcomes the anthropocentric perspective: there will be boundaries as long as living beings exist, which means, as long as life exists. For boundaries are crucial to any kind of organic life; i.e. to life. The vital need for boundaries, and the potentiality to overcome each particular one of them is crucial to Simmel's argument. He humbly calls this a 'pair of statements,' which summarize his whole position on this matter. These two statements are: '(t)hat the boundary is unconditional in that its existence is constitutive of our given position in the world, but that no boundary is unconditional since every one can in principle be altered, reached over, gotten around – this pair of statements appears as the explication of the **inner unity of vital action**' (Simmel, 2010:2, my emphasis).

We have now reached the point at which an unfolding the different, and yet so complementary, uses of the concept of boundary in Simmel's texts is possible, and necessary. We shall begin with the most general use of the concept, i.e. when it comes to specify its relation to the concept of life, as a condition *sine qua non* for life itself; we shall then focus on human life, and will, finally, come to speak about the boundaries of space and time, which are the most common spheres of use of the concept.

Life and boundaries

Simmel's interest for life, from a scientific but above all philosophical and creative viewpoint, grew exponentially in the last decade of his life. This growing interest for the fascinating miracle of life (my expression, not Simmel's) was never compartmentalized in his thought. It spilled over in all directions of his intellectual passions and interests, including the field of aesthetics, pedagogy and, last but not least, sociology. Goodstein has argued how Simmel claimed in his 'Beginning of an Unfinished Self-Presentation' (GSG 20, p. 304 f.) how the principle of *Wechselwirkung* (verbatim translated: reciprocal effect(s)), which was at first mainly crucial to his sociological works, became central to his cosmivision. It became a metaphysical principle through which he sought to understand the world from a relational perspective (Goodstein 2017, p. 61–90; Goodstein 2019). We already find traces of relationism (relativism) being presented as the worldview of modern times in *Philosophy of Money*, especially and most explicitly in its first chapter (Simmel, 2004, p. 101–130).

The principle of *Wechselwirkung*, i.e. the assertion that everything that happens in the world (not only the human world) results from relations, from reciprocal actions and effects, came also to shape the form in which Simmel approached 'life'. Hence, *Wechselwirkung* or reciprocal relations/effects are the other side of the theorization on boundaries. They mutually need and imply each other. The relationship he saw between his sociological principle, and the understanding of 'life' is captured in a brief passage of *Fundamental Questions of Sociology* (1917), where he argued how central it is for understanding life as well as society to focus on the invisible, continuous relational processes which lie behind the great 'forms' we can observe. They need each other, certainly, but there is more to society than forms, and there is more to life than forms, too. If we only had forms, no boundaries would be overcome, process, change and relations would stop, and everything would be contained, frozen, in fixed forms. Yet forms are not fixed, and boundaries are overcome; life goes on. In Simmel's words:

To confine ourselves to the large social formations resembles the older science of anatomy with its limitation to the major, definitely circumscribed organs such as heart, liver, lungs, and stomach, and with its neglect of the innumerable, popularly unnamed or unknown tissues. Yet without these, the more obvious organs could never constitute a living organism. On the basis of the major social formations – the traditional subject matter of social science – it would be similarly impossible to piece together the real life of society as we encounter it in our experience. Without the interspersed effects of countless minor syntheses, society would break up into a multitude of discontinuous systems. Sociation continuously emerges and ceases and emerges again. Even where its eternal flux and pulsation are not sufficiently strong to form organizations proper, they link individuals together (Simmel, 1950, pp. 9–10).

And yet forms are fundamental. If we bring together Simmel's theorization on relationism and his theorization on boundaries, we acknowledge that for him neither social life nor life in general is only the Heraclitan flux, or Bergson's *élan vital*. Life is indeed flux, but it is also form (Fitzi, 2002). In 'Life as Transcendence' Simmel argues the case for an 'absolute concept of life', (Simmel, 2010, p. 13, 16) which unites the constant flowing of life with the necessary being formed in order to live. He is aware of the apparent paradox that a definition of life implies which is simultaneously life stream and form. However, in 'Life as Transcendence' he makes a formidable effort to unmask this apparent paradox and turn it into a question of the limits of logic and human reflection when confronted with titanic task of defining and expressing in words (i.e. forms) what life is (Simmel, 2010, pp. 13-16). In this sense, too, language and logic set boundaries which we strive to overcome, just to encounter the next. Simmel brings language and expression certainly beyond most taken-for-granted boundaries, when he approaches life in the following terms:

(l)ife is at once fixed and variable; of finished shape, and developing further; formed, and ever breaking through its forms; persisting, yet rushing onward; bounded and free; circling around in subjectivity, yet standing objectively over things and over itself – all these contrast are but unfoldings or refractions of that metaphysical fact: the innermost essence of life is its capacity to go out beyond itself, to set its limits by reaching out beyond them; that is, beyond itself (Simmel, 2010, p. 10).

In a way, we could argue that what some Simmel scholars may have interpreted as a dialectical motive in the work of this author cannot be understood as dialectics but as the 'inner unity of

vital action' (see above), which, as long as there is life, sets boundaries that shall be overcome.⁶ The setting of these boundaries works by creating individual forms. Forms that are unique for as long as they last (and they may remain materially or in more or less conscious 'memory' as 'more-than-life'). That life can only be life in forms sounds like a paradox, indeed. Simmel uses the term 'paradox' and 'deep contradiction' when attempting to bring the language to its limits in order to describe this 'inner unity' of life, which, abstracted and rationalized to a certain extent, dwells on and expands this duality, expressing itself in the form of two 'ultimate worldshaping principles'. Continuity and change, life and form, constitute together the 'absolute concept of life,' which englobes both, as (following Simmel) could not be otherwise. And this would not be possible without boundaries. Boundaries allow individuality to emerge, with its contours and uniqueness. And it lasts for a while, until the boundaries are no more, and new boundaries emerge. Life overcomes boundaries as an individual, until that individual does not overcome them anymore, and it stays at this side of the boundary so to speak, while life keeps on flowing, elsewhere. Forms are individual, not only in the human sense, full of awareness and consciousness (also of one's own forthcoming death). No, all forms are individual, for life materialized as '(t)he hereditary material out of which an organism develops', Simmel claims, 'contains **countless individual elements,**' and this individuality of each of the elements that compose even the simplest organism result in the fact that **the relationship of the living being to its past is not mechanical,** for it is true for each of these elements that 'the past sequence which leads to *its* individuality can by no means be replaced by another' (Simmel, 2010, p. 6, *emphasis in the original; my emphasis*). Form means boundaries/limits, Simmel adds, limits that separate one form from its neighbour, creating a centrifugal force towards these limits that are claimed and reinforced, and a centripetal force towards its centre, providing the '(p)eriphery with a firm hold against dissolution in the flux' (Simmel, 2010:11).

This flux is an undifferentiated stream that needs to become *something* – and there is nothing without form – in order to be. This may sound like a paradox, and yet it is the only way in which the unity of life can exist (Simmel, 2010, p. 16), as '(i)ndividuality is everywhere something alive, and life is everywhere individual' (Simmel, 2010, p. 12). They *must* go together. And Simmel states that the problematization of this fact, of this togetherness – or rather this unity, as togetherness already implies the previous separation in two parts, and the questioning regarding how they can go together at all, is the exception and not the rule. It only emerges as a problem in 'certain culture-historical situations', in which this duality delivers

itself up as a problem to the intellect, which (because by its character it cannot do otherwise) as an antinomy projects it back even onto that ultimate stratum of life. This stratum is dominated by something which intellect can only call the overcoming of the duality by unity, but which is in itself a third principle beyond duality and unity: the essence of life as the transcendence of itself. In *one* act, it creates something more than the vital stream itself – individual structure – and then breaks through this form that has been etched by a blockage in that stream, which lets the stream reach out beyond its bounds and plunge back again into the ongoing flux. **We are not divided into life free from limits and form made secure by them**; we do not live partly in continuity, partly in individuality, the two asserting themselves against each other. Rather, the fundamental essence of life is precisely that internally unified function which, albeit symbolically and inadequately, I have termed the **transcendence** of itself, and which immediately **actualizes as one life what is then split** – by feelings, destinies, and conceptualization – into the dualism of **continuous life flux** and **individually closed form** (Simmel, 2010, p. 13, my emphasis).

The depicted dualism is therefore a matter of expression, of conceptualization, and of the context in which our lives now develop, of modern human experience. And yet this may not be more than an anecdotal footnote in the book of life, in which an absolute unity between vital stream and form holds. In order to express the relation of the continuous flowing (the so-called vital stream) and the (individual) forms, Simmel coined the concepts of ‘more-life’ and ‘more-than-life’ so as to better explain the ‘absolute concept of life.’ ‘More-life’ and ‘more-than-life’ are two aspects or dimensions from which we can view and understand life (Simmel, 2010:13). Without them, there is no life. And they share a fundamental characteristic: the setting and overcoming of boundaries is fundamental to them both.

Life, in order to be life, has to be more-life. For life cannot stand still, it is always becoming, overcoming its own finitude (i.e. its finite boundaries) and setting new boundaries to be overcome. When life stops overcoming boundaries, when the stream of life stops overcoming itself in the forms it inhabits, and hence going beyond its boundaries, life ceases to be. When no boundaries are crossed, that which was alive, that concrete individuality that was alive, is no more.

(S)o long as life is present at all, it begets vitality, because sheer physiological self-maintenance involves continual regeneration. This is not one function that it exercises among others; rather, insofar as it does this it is its life. If, as I am furthermore convinced, death is immanent in life

from the outset, this, too, is a stepping out of life beyond itself. While remaining in its center, life stretches out toward the absolute of life, as it were, and becomes in this direction more-life; but it also stretches out toward nothingness, and just as it persists and yet increases itself in *one* action, so also it persists and declines in *one* action, *as one action.*' (Simmel, 2010, pp. 13 f.)

Birth and death are the thresholds of life, and are seen in close, 'deep,' relationship with each other. Birth and death as boundaries themselves. They are already/still part of the life of the individual form who has been born, is alive, and dies, but they connect the existence of this concrete individuality with a beyond, which cannot be lived by the same individuality. Life overcomes this boundary as well, but that concrete form, through which life was lived, does not. New forms will emerge in its place, through new births, towards new deaths (Simmel, 2010, p. 14; Kemple, 2019b)

If we now focus our attention upon the question of the 'more-than-life,' we will have to acknowledge that at this point is where a certain anthropocentric bias partially colours Simmel's conceptualization of life, as he explains the 'more-than-life' from a human viewpoint only, and linking it to human creativity. We will come back to this point in our next section, when we focus explicitly and specifically on Simmel's observations about human life.

Human Life through boundaries

Without arguing that only humans can become individualized, Simmel does argue in *View of Life* that the human form of individuality is perhaps the most complete, aware and, above all, *creative*. As has been stated above, no form of life is a mere mechanical reproduction of its elements, as each of these elements is indeed individual, and, in this sense, formed, bounded and therefore unique and special. And yet, the paradox of life (between life streaming and form) becomes particularly interesting when Simmel focuses upon this paradox in relation to human life: We

(c)onceive life as a continuous stream proceeding through successive generations. Yet the bearers of this process (i.e., not those who have it, but those who **are** it) are individuals (i.e. closed, self-centered, unambiguously distinct beings). Although the stream of life flows through – or more accurately, *as* – these individuals, it nevertheless dams up in each of them and becomes a sharply outlined form. Each individual then asserts itself as a complete entity, both against other individuals of its kind and against the total environment with all its contents, and

it does not tolerate any blurring of its periphery (Simmel, 2010, p. 9, *emphasis in the original, my emphasis*).

This idea of the individual protecting and claiming his or her boundaries relationally against a society that at the same time makes these boundaries possible echoes with what Simmel argued in the second and fourth chapters of *Fundamental Questions of Sociology* (1917, GSG 16, pp. 59–149), when he dealt from different angles with the relation ‘individual-society’.

Life is caught up in forms, forms that allow individuality, boundaries and limits that mark where I begin, where you end, and make the bridge possible that we cross to communicate, to touch, to consciously create a ‘together’. The ‘sharply outlined forms’ of our human individualities, which we assert and strive to keep bounded throughout our lives, constitute the contested limits of the self, of our-selves.⁷ And, as Simmel claims in so numerous occasions, no limits are forever: ‘(s)ince life’s further flowing is incessant all the same – since the persisting centrality of the total organism, of the “I”, or its more relative contents, cannot nullify the essential continuity of the flowing – the idea arises that life pushes out beyond the given organic, or spiritual, or objective form; that it overflows the dam’ (Simmel, 2010, p. 9). The limits of myself, of herself, your limits, are the dam of this so precious individuality which cannot and will not last. And yet these individualities are as much part of life as the continuous flowing. Life is flux and boundedness, the stream and the forms, shaped as ‘individualized midpoints’ (Simmel, 2010, p. 9).

When dealing with the ‘more-than-life’ Simmel argues that we encounter it in human creativity, in the capacity to create something which comes from us, but which is not us, and whose existence becomes independent from us from the very moment of its creation. This is not restricted to geniuses, like Rembrandt or Goethe, who furthermore, in their creative endeavours are *almost* capable of letting us ‘touch,’ ‘feel,’ that absolute concept of life in which the vital streaming and the form are united, beyond or before the awareness and problematisation of dualities (i.e. without logical boundaries between them) (Simmel, 2010, p. 16). No, the creative processes, the imagination, Simmel refers to at this point are in all of us, and are ‘us’. And they allow us to produce from/in our lives something whose existence becomes independent from ours from its very initial moment, and which nonetheless has emerged from the creative individual spirits (of course always in interrelation with each other) (Simmel, 2010, p. 14 f.).

Simmel makes here a parallelism between the creation of more-than-life from the creative human spirit and the ‘creation’ of offspring (so often misunderstood as ‘reproduction’ in so many spheres of our lives). Our offspring are, as the products of our creative spirits, independent

beings in spite of having been originated from no other potency than ours, human beings and their parent(s). Paralleling thus this process of producing a new being, and of being born as a new independent being (in the sense of an individual form with his/her own boundaries), Simmel argues:

(s)o too the creation of an independently meaningful content is immanent to life at the level of the spirit. The fact that our ideas and cognitions, our values and judgments stand completely beyond the creative life in their meaning, their objective intelligibility and their historical effectiveness – this is the exact characteristic of human life. Just as life's transcendence, within the plane of life itself, of its current, delimited form constitutes more-life (although it is nevertheless the immediate, inescapable essence of life itself), so also its transcendence into the level of objective content, of logically autonomous and no longer vital meaning, constitutes more-than-life, which is inseparable from it and is the essence of spiritual life itself' (Simmel, 2010, p. 16).

At this point, and dealing as we are with boundaries, it may be an appropriate moment to question the clear-cut boundary that Simmel establishes between 'more-life' (from the renewal of cells to the birth of offspring) and 'more-than-life' (from the economic and legal system, to the forms of association and cultural production). Perhaps the boundary between 'more-life' and 'more-than-life' is less clear-cut and strict than some paragraphs of 'Life as Transcendence' (and Simmel's thematization of this issue in general) invite us to assume. Of course, when Simmel speaks of the birth of offspring, he is arguing along the lines of strict organic reproduction. However, also here I claim that the century of scientific investigations that separates us from him has allowed us to problematize if there is anything like 'strict organic reproduction', without *forms* of care, relation, proximity (sensorial and otherwise), among so many others. This certainly applies to the birth of new individual living beings, but if we pay close attention to the thesis of epigenetics, it may go well beyond it. In a way, it seems that in all aspects and ambits of life boundaries are always porous (more or less, but porous all the same), and set to be overcome.

If we focus on the way in which Simmel speaks about the *forms* in which the past lives beyond itself, and reaches out to us, to our present and to the bit of future that is present in our present, he speaks of the two forms in which this may happen: as objectifications and as memories (Simmel, 2010. p.7) The first, the objectifications, are 'traditional' more-than-life: those products of human creativity that are born from us, but which become independent from us,

stable and fixed forms as soon as they and us are separated. Thus, as soon as I write this sentence, as soon as this chapter is sent, as soon as this handbook is published, these very words have an existence unattached from my own. In this way our creative imagination and incarnated culture produce objects, parts of the objective culture, which will stare back at us from their impassibility of forms when we are no longer ourselves, but, if we are still alive, have become someone else. And will remain there once we are gone. The second, the memories, are known to be more processual. We may not only remain in a non-alive way, in a non-material (related to our own bodies, not to materiality in general) in the products we have created, which have come to enlarge the sphere of objective culture in a way or another, but also in the memories that live not in the books, laws, techniques we have co-created, but in the minds, in the spirits of those who remember us, and also in their bodies – in their habitus, in their tastes and dispositions, in the colour of their eyes and the ways they move their hands. And here we see already the more-life and more-than-life entangling and becoming one; their boundaries blurring in the individual form of another being. For offspring is never only more-life (and I am not implying that more-life is not much!), but an individual and unique form that embraces life fully, contains and channels life in all its modes, modulations and aspects.

The boundaries of time

(T)he **reality of life** at any moment carries its past within it in a very different way from that of a mechanical phenomenon' (Simmel, 2010, p. 6, my emphasis).

In 'Life as Transcendence' Simmel argues that it is only in life, which he defined as a 'mode of existence', where time can exist and make sense. Time exists (only) for living beings, and in a very particular way for human beings, for whom the experience of time is a way of consciously and experientially making sense of the changes of relations, of matter, of states. Human beings have a peculiarity among the living beings, an 'original phenomenon', which is their self-awareness. The 'I' exists as an I and a me, it confronts itself, and makes itself object of its knowing, observing, even feeling; but, moreover, it can also observe itself as a third party. In humans, Simmel argues, life has reached the stage of consciousness (*Geist*). We do not need to discuss again the question of the boundary of consciousness – whether humans are the only conscious ones and to what an extent. But it is clear that Simmel attaches to the level of human consciousness the analysis of the ways in which life can carry its past into its present: through objectification in concepts and structures as well as through memory. In memory, '(t)he past of

the subjective life not only becomes the cause of the life of the present, but also continues over into the present with its contents **relatively** unchanged' (Simmel, 2010, p. 7, my emphasis).

The past, in our memory, lives in us and has made us into what we are in the present. Yet this past has not disappeared completely in the process. It has made it to the other side of the temporal boundary that separates past from present. Hence,

(t)he sphere of actual, present life stretches all the way back to the moment of its formation. Of course, the past as such does not thereby rise from the grave; but because we comprehend an experience not as a present thing, but rather as one that is attached to some moment in the past, our present is not focused on one point, as is that of a mechanical existence, but is, so to speak, extended backward. At such instances we live beyond the moment back into the past. It is similar with our relation to the future, which is no way adequately characterized by defining man as the 'goal-setting' being (Simmel, 2010, p. 7).

In this way, our experience of life (or life as an experience) does not take place in a strict present tense, but this present, while being present, has so to speak a foot in the past and a foot in the future. Experienced time overcomes boundaries of measured time. In parallel to the division of the concept of life as life stream and forms, which Simmel claims to be more related to our understanding and logical thinking than to the reality of life itself, a similar phenomenon takes place in relation to the human conceptualization of time, which is '(d)isrupted and crystallized into the logical differentiation of three grammatically separate tenses' (Simmel, 2010, p. 7).

This disruption and crystallisation of the three forms of time, the tenses (past, present and future), turns the continuum of time into three watertight compartments, setting clear boundaries to time: past – present – future. The present becomes a fine, subtle and thin line, the past is 'a long before' that is closed, unreachable, and the future becomes an opening to the unknown, to an afterwards. These crystallisations, as Simmel terms them to emphasize their rigidness, make our thoughts, words, experiences of time conceal the immediate continuity and fluidity of the boundaries between past-present-future. Simmel contrast these crystallisations with the past which is alive in the present life process, and the 'immediate continuous stretching of itself [of the life process] into the future' (Simmel, 2010, p. 7). Thus he argues that '(t) he future does not lie ahead of us like some untrodden land that is separated from the present by a **sharp boundary line**, but rather **we live continually in a border region that belongs as much to the future as to the present**' (Simmel, 2010, p. 7 f., my emphasis).

This differentiation between sharp boundary lines and border regions is of a great analytical significance. While in the way in which we think of, conceptualize and measure abstract time, we work with clear-cut boundaries (sharp boundary lines), experientially we live in an extended and stretching time (border region), which carries the past, keeping it partially alive and present (while losing/forgetting many pieces of information, experiences – contents – in the process) and living with a foot already in the future. Thus our present life is extended from a preserved/remembered past towards a future that, paraphrasing Luhmann, ‘cannot begin’ (Luhmann, 1976), as we’re already living towards it, in it.

When we speak of and from the experience of life (and not of a conceptualization of time), the precise division of past, present and future does not and cannot hold. This clear-cut division follows the mechanistic model, which the opening quote of this section speaks about in order to differentiate it from ‘the reality of life’ (Simmel, 2010, p. 8). Time, presented through these clear-cut boundaries between past, present and future, is not real. ‘Time is real only for life alone. (...) Time is life seen apart from its contents, because life alone transcends in both directions the atemporal present-point of every other reality and only thereby realizes, all by itself, the temporal dimension (i.e., time)’ (Simmel, 2010, p. 8).

In order to elaborate further on the difference between the temporal conceptualisation as divided in three tenses in its ‘full logical strictness’ and the reality of time within life (or time in ‘the reality of life’), Simmel postulates that the ‘mechanical’ present

(d)oes not encompass more than the absolute unextendedness of a moment; it is as little time as the point is space. It denotes exclusively the collision of past and future, which alone make up amounts of time; that is, time as such. But since the one is no longer, and the other not yet, reality adheres to the present alone; this means that reality is not at all something temporal; the concept of time can be applied to reality’s contents only if the atemporality they possess as present has become a ‘no more’ or a ‘not yet’, at any rate a nothing. **Time is not in reality, and reality is not time.** We acknowledge the force of this paradox, however, only for the logically observed object. The subjectively lived life will not adjust to it; the latter is felt, no matter whether or not it is logically justified, to be something real in a temporal dimension. Common usage indicates this, if in an inexact and superficial way, by understanding of the term ‘present’ not only the mere punctuality of this conceptual sense, but also always a bit of the past and a somewhat smaller bit of the future. (These ‘bits’ vary greatly in size according to whether the present in question is of a personal or political, cultural or geological nature) (Simmel, 2010, p. 6).

There is a continuity in the mode of existence of life, the past and the future are not pushed towards the realm of the unreal, and they are not disconnected from each other by a logical separation: the past exists into the present, and the present exists into its future, and this is life; i.e. the overcoming of boundaries in ‘growth, procreation, and the spiritual processes’ (Simmel, 2010, p. 8). We set the limits in time between the tenses, just to overcome them, to live in a tense that our grammar does not contemplate and does not speak about (and thus does not allow us to speak about).

If we focus on the ‘border region’ between past and present, we have to deal with issues of forgetting and preserving/remembering (as objectifications or memories). Forgetting and preserving/remembering live towards the present and both shape it. The present we inhabit and incarnate is not only shaped by the part of the past that lives in us, through us, as memories and objectifications, but also *as* us: the ‘us’ we have become through what has been kept, but also that which has been lost – what is forgotten and lost also shapes our present being (like erosion shapes the shore and the cliffs, as much as the sand, water and rocks that remain).

If we focus on the border region between present (already shaped by and counter-intuitively pregnant with the past) and the future, we encounter the issue of uncertainty: of living towards the unknown and, to a considerable extent, the unknowable. Simmel illustrates this point with the example of the chess player: ‘We are all like the chess player in this regard: if he did not know with a reasonable degree of probability what consequences would result from a certain move, the game would be impossible; but it would also be impossible if this foresight extended indefinitely’ (Simmel, 2010, p. 2). Simmel addresses here the limit between the knowable and not-knowable, foreseeable and unforeseeable. However, he addresses it with one of the easiest examples. Most relational contexts in our lives (and in life in general) are less patterned and ruled than a chess game. Life does not evolve in a controlled context in which only certain moves are possible, times are structured, and boundaries are marked by squares of black and white. Of course, Simmel is very well aware of this fact, and claims that the border between knowledge and ignorance is not the only fact that ‘makes our life what we know it to be’. It is also the border between preserving/remembering and forgetting, creating and reproducing, imagining and expressing, proximity and distance. Furthermore, Simmel adds, the relation between knowing and not knowing changes as life goes by, and as the relational constellations in which we partake change (Simmel, 2010, p. 2). The perspective on these relational constellations also changes to our eyes (to our senses in general, to our comprehension and experience...) when we move across social and spatial positions. Social mobility, migration,

transitions in gender (performative) identities can all be understood, and meaningfully analysed, as processes of boundary making and boundary breaking, of boundary crossing (the boundary does not need to break, sometimes it stands, but we have made it to the other side – like in cases of social mobility (upwards or downwards). The same applies to our relational and more or less mobile position within concrete social fields.

The boundaries of space

With these last examples we have started to transit the boundary between the section on the boundaries of time and our final section: on the boundaries of space, physical as well as social. They are not essential, but, as all boundaries and borders, relational. Boundaries are fluid, a condensation of reciprocal relations of proximity and distance which consolidate the proximity within the bounded territory and emphasize the distance with what lies beyond it. The claim that boundaries are fluid is not meant to be a tasteless, or even sarcastic, comment in front of the many human beings who die trying to cross a border, or when considering the many migrants, the so-called ‘illegal migrants’ who make it to the other side – thus crossing the border that was erected to keep them at distance – at a cost perhaps so much higher than they had ever imagined. It means that the boundary that regulates who shall live or shall die, who shall pass or shall remain on the other side, is a boundary that has not always been there, and more than likely will not always be there. It is a relational boundary that is formed and holds, with all available mechanisms of power applied to reinforce it precisely because (and not despite of the fact that) it is surmountable. Any boundary can be crossed, any boundary can be overcome. But sadly, that does not mean that anybody can cross it at any time. The regulation of movements (fluxes) and relations is the fundamental reason for the emergence of spatial boundaries in the first place.

The *place* where physical boundaries emerge and crystallise is also not an essential characteristic of the landscape or of the boundaries themselves (Massey, 2005). It is again a relational process in which humans and non-humans are relationally involved. The mountains, the rivers, the seas and lakes, economic and political interests, biopolitics and geopolitics, desires and necessities, wars and hunger all in interrelation with one another end up forming borders that will sometimes or even often be crossed, and one day will be burst.

If we focus on the so significant example of political boundaries, we can argue their crucial role in emphasizing distance instead of proximity in their attempt to regulate the mobility of living beings (plants, animals, and if we want a separate category for us, also humans) and non-living beings, some viewed as merchandise, others viewed as trash, others uncontrollable and often

unseen (like air, rain or radiation). All these boundary crossers can be classified (and treated accordingly) as ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’, ‘desired’ or ‘undesired’, ‘benign’ or ‘dangerous.’ Of course, not all borders and boundaries that are projected upon space are incarnated and make ‘place’ with the same intensity and condensed power as political boundaries. These have life-shaping and life-changing consequences.

There are boundaries between rooms (living-rooms and dormitories, kitchens and offices), with entries regulated by doors that can be open and invite our crossing or closed, marking a beyond that cannot be seen. These everyday life boundaries frame and form different activities that are expected and anticipated to be located within their walls/doors, and which regulate and organise practices as well as relationships.

There are also invisible, movable boundaries around our bodies (‘they’ move as ‘we’ move). Depending on circumstances, conventions and context, these invisible boundaries have a narrower or wider diameter, which marks that personal space that *should* only be crossed in intimacy. There are boundaries we set by closing our eyes, or by looking down or away, to protect ourselves from being read into, from being connected to another person, a stranger in the metropolis, a boss, a lover. There are boundaries we set by using our headphones in public transport, or that are set for us, like for example when teenagers enter into the room wearing headphones but with their music so loud that you know there is no use in talking to them: the border is ‘on.’ We set boundaries by putting clothes on our bodies, some emphasizing the distance, others advertising the porosity of the boundary, playing with it. Our interrelations are a continuous interplay with boundary setting and boundary overcoming, proximity and distance.

The theoretical elucidations Simmel offered to his readers regarding the processes of boundary setting in relation to the continuum that goes from close proximity and remote distance reside mostly in the above mention essay ‘The Sociology of Space’ (GSG 7, 132–183) and *Sociology*’s ninth chapter (GSG 11, 687–790) as well as in the essays ‘Metropolis and the Life of the Mind’ (Simmel, 1997, 174–185) and ‘Bridge and Door’ (Simmel, 1997, p. 170–174). While in the essay Simmel argues more along the lines I have just discussed above regarding the invisible boundaries we set to our senses in order to channel interrelations and stimuli derived from a high density of humans and non-humans inhabiting together a relatively small and crowded place, in *Sociology* he focuses more on the way in which boundaries are set in order to claim power, territories, or affiliations. In this sense, the ninth chapter of *Sociology* focuses on paradigmatic examples of institutions according to the way they deal with their boundaries and the processes of setting limits and borders. Thus, he identified two poles of the continuum

regarding the way these institutions set their relationship to space through the way they determine and fix their borders: on the one side of the continuum we find the state, which requires clear-cut borders upon space so that no two states can occupy together the same territory. On the other side of the continuum we find the ‘church’, understood as a religious community which can be spread ‘all over the place’ and sets its boundaries along the community of believers. Thus, the believers are, in a way, the boundaries of the religious community. Within the same believer no two religions can coexist and claim the same amount of faith and commitment from her, and yet the person next to her can be the boundary of another religious community. In the middle between these two poles of the continuum we have the municipality, or the guilds within a particular city. In the case of the municipality the boundaries are clear, and, notwithstanding there is an ‘area of influence’ (intellectual, political, economic) which expands, Simmel argues, in ‘waves’.

Considering the relation of the human being (and the human body) to the surroundings, i.e. considering the position of the human being relationally, Simmel argues how the overcoming of the boundaries set by our senses have completely changed the view we have of the world, how we relate to one another, and how we position ourselves (and are positioned) in this new universe – made possible by the overcoming and setting of (new) boundaries. In one of the most beautiful paragraphs of ‘Life as Transcendence,’ we have been able to overcome what we see with our naked eyes thanks to the telescope and the microscope. We could add from our current perspective, how we are also able to see each other from unsurmountable distances for our plain senses, through webcams and videos and streaming, how we have been able to overcome the speed at which our legs can carry us from here to there by trains, cars, airplanes, even rockets. We have been able to overcome the boundaries set by our ears through the telephone, and now with mobile technologies and the Internet. We can even listen to and see each other as we chat with each other across oceans, thus creating spaces of interaction where physical proximity is not requires any longer. Touch and smell are somewhat far behind, at the moment. But efforts are being made to overcome these boundaries too.

I would like to conclude these explorations and reflections on Simmel’s concept of boundaries/limits/borders (*Grenzen*) with a renewed calling of attention to the centrality of this concept within a relational paradigm: whatever boundary we cross or push forward has an effect on us, changing our relational position within a constellation which is, in the most continuous tense, in a process of continuously becoming. In a moment like ours, it may be wise therefore to close this text by recalling Simmel’s words helping us become aware of the consequences of the boundaries we cross and push. We are surrounded by boundaries and limits, we cross some

of them, individually and collectively. Others remain simply potentially crossable, but we move towards another direction, or at least we think we do. But this would be a topic for a different chapter. Let us invite Simmel to close this chapter, by simultaneously inviting the reader to link Simmel's words to the contemporary challenges we are facing with an Anthropocene that many of us look at as boundary which we hope we will be able to cross hoping that, on the other side, we will have a chance to create new boundaries that will make, at least for a while, our world more liveable, retaining our 'cosmic diminution,' which certainly can help us with its humbling echoes, but cherishing the relational threads that allow us to become who we are becoming by setting us boundaries and giving us resources to cross them.

(W)e regard ourselves in a hitherto unheard of cosmic diminution. As we push our boundaries out into the realm of the measureless, our relations to such vast spaces and times press us back in our consciousness to the magnitude boundary of an infinitesimal point (Simmel, 2010, p. 4).

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¹ I conceive the concept of *Grenze* in German as meaning borders, limits and boundaries at the same time. In this text, if I do not need to specify one of these three meanings, I shall use the English word ‘boundary/ies’ as the wider translation of the concept of ‘*Grenze/n*.’

² What we understand as ‘sociology’ has changed since 1908, not the least because of the reception of Simmel’s works. Precisely from this scholarly perspective we should acknowledge that a part of the beyond-sociology which Simmel thematizes in the quote, as a further and crucial relational dimension of humanity, has been worked upon, and captured in the magnificent formula ‘more-than-human’ sociology, proposed by Pyyhtinen. (Pyyhtinen, 2016)

³ In relation to the title of Simmel’s works in English, I follow Elizabeth Goodstein’s (2017) rightful critique and recommendation to leave the ‘the’ behind: in *(The) Philosophy of Money* as well as in *(The) View of Life* – thus emphasizing the Simmelian position that seldom there is only one standpoint on such important matters as life or money (and through it contemporary society in all its complexities and spheres). (See GSG 6 & GSG 16)

⁴ For a comparative perspective on Simmel’s three versions of ‘The Problem of Sociology’ (GSG 5, 1992: 52-61; GSG11, 1992; GSG 16, 1999:59-149), see Cantó-Milà, 2019:139-150.

⁵ Opening now a discussion about the transdisciplinary character of Simmel’s contributions and oeuvre in general would lead to hundreds of pages, which have already been written by others. See for instance Goodstein 2017; Pyyhtinen 2018; Fitzi, 2019; Kemple, 2019a.

⁶ Thus, for instance, while Goodstein, 2017; Landmann, 1958; Schermer and Jary, 2013; Weinstein and Weinstein, 1993, among others, Willi Goetschel has emphasized how Simmel avoided the term dialectics and sought to move beyond it. In his words: ‘Simmel pointedly refrains from the use of the term dialectic. In fact, there is only one instance, as far as I can see, where dialectic appears in Simmel’s writing in the title of a text. It is a newspaper article from September 28, 1916 in the Berlin paper *Der Tag*, in its “Illustrated Section.” In the middle of the First World War the essay’s title “Die Dialektik des deutschen Geistes” (“The Dialectic of the German Spirit”) exudes a rather pessimist tone that the text’s subdued tenor confirms (GSG 13, 224-230). Dialectic, we can say, presents for Simmel a somber notion that signals risk, danger, and possible disaster and destruction.’ (Goetschel, 2019:135, my emphasis)

⁷ In relation to the conceptualization of the ‘self’ I would like to quote from Simons’ 2019 essay: ‘The self is associated with a process that mediates between the world and life. It exhibits a desire for forms, but at the same time it is also compelled to transgress any and all boundaries.’(Simons, 2019, p. 110) This essay examines Simmel’s concept of forms and boundaries, relating it to Goethe in a way that has not been done before, and opening many new insights to Simmel scholars.