Georg Simmel was recently included among sociology’s founding fathers, after years of neglect. This article contends that it happened because Western culture is facing a deep crisis and is no longer able to ostracize authors who think along different lines. Simmel’s success proves that the cultural variant that dominated the West for three centuries is losing its supremacy and can no longer cope with thinkers belonging to alternative variants. On the basis of Dumont’s work on European culture and the German variant it is possible to deconstruct the main issues that were raised against Simmel. They turn out to stem from prejudice and misunderstanding, as those who criticized Simmel either could not understand his Weltanschauung or did not share it and considered it a threat to the modern way of life.

Keywords: European cultural variants; Dumont; modernity; Simmel; Western ideology

Introduction

Georg Simmel died in 1918 and was promptly forgotten. Until the seventies of the twentieth century, his works were scarcely cited and heavily plundered, according to his own prevision: he foresaw that his intellectual heritage would be like cash money, with no mention made of its provenance (Frisby 2002). Since then, anyway, a real Simmel Renaissance has been taking place (De Simone 2002, p. 11). Simmel’s thought, however, is the object of controversial interpretations that exploit the glitter of the new fad, but do not come to terms with all that was said before and during the long oblivion. Nor do they acknowledge any essential difference between its workings and those currently maintained by prevalent culture. There is no apparent conflict between these different versions of Simmel. Taking a look at contemporary sociology, one could gather the impression that several Simmels lived and died in Berlin at the start of the twentieth century, without meeting one another and holding opposite positions.

How very Simmelian, to let all this be with no fuss and no strain, with no one trying to gain the upper hand! It is indeed more and more difficult to lay claim to an authentic interpretation of a subject whatsoever and Simmel’s work can be seen as an actual monument to reality’s contradictory richness. It is all too easy to find in it clues and elements that offer a possible basis for various theoretical constructions.
after all this is what hermeneutics is about. Today any confrontation with a canonical author should do without the kind of reverence and passive acceptance that risks transforming it into a visit to a museum. This should not mean, however, that there are no limits to exegetical power, as – more often than not – those who advocate such freedom do it on a polemic or ideological basis. Looking for confirmations or new intuitions in a classical text means acting in a voluntaristic and finalistic way. Every choice, every selection stems from value judgments that influence the final result, so that the new reading is in fact an interaction, a \textit{Wechselwirkung}, between text and reader that brings about new issues.\textsuperscript{1}

If ‘it is clear that a text, all the more so an author, cannot be reduced to a single horizon of sense, but opens up different and often diverging horizons’ (Dal Lago 1985, p. 486), it is nonetheless true that possible constructions should not be stretched in order to include textual passages that contradict them, nor should they be adopted in spite of their clash with known opinions held by the author to which they are being attributed. Subjective interpretation, therefore, is a fertile means as long as it does not lose sight of its being relative and partial, thus becoming a predefined scheme into which to constrict the author’s theory, if not his life. Georg Simmel has often been a victim of such treatments, so much so that it seems an interesting idea to try and dig out the reasons for the systematic misunderstanding of his propositions and for the silence that followed its denial.

In this article I shall contend that Simmel was first forgotten and then misunderstood not only for his ideas, but for the particular way in which they were born and expressed. Simmel himself is not the real target of the ostracism: it is aimed at his \textit{modus operandi}, so different from the academic norm, and to the culture that made it possible, perceived as a threat to the predominant way of thinking. According to this, Simmel has always been hard to place, a disturbing thinker that Rella would define \textit{‘atopic’}.\textsuperscript{2} He troubled the establishment until it found no other way to cope with him than to set up an ‘authentic’ interpretation of his theses meant to render him harmless. Right-wing or left-wing critics, it made no difference: he always remained the \textit{Other}, the Jew or the stranger that indeed he was. Yet his work could be seen under a different light, as is plain in Banfi’s interpretation: ‘It seems to me, then, that in Simmel’s philosophy and pedagogy of Life there is a clear conscience of the contemporary spirit’s crisis that causes many structural values to crumble; and yet it raises itself, or strives to raise, to a positive significance’ (Banfi 1961, p. 211). Banfi’s life and works are enough to put him beyond suspicion of aestheticism or flight from reality. He was an Italian resistant, a politician and a thinker in whose philosophy \textit{‘absolute rationalism coincides … with absolute empiricism. Critical rationalism makes use of reason not as a substance, but as a function, and reason leads it to discover that reality and experience exist in the interweaving relations that form their support’} (Cantoni in Banfi 1961, p. xiv).

This idea bears close resemblance to Simmel’s \textit{Wechselwirkung}. Banfi – Simmel’s pupil, like Lukács – is a free spirit, solidly self-assured and able to stand the blow of alterity and to gain whatever riches it may conceal. This makes him different from those who dared not venture such an interpretation, but were satisfied with Durkheim’s definition of Simmel’s reasoning as a ‘bastard speculation’. This reaction to the atopical quality of Simmel’s thought comes from ‘the unavowable anguish [felt] in front of the social world’s ever-changing processuality’ (Maffesoli 1985, p. 40). Dal Lago himself – who nevertheless suggests that Simmel’s cognitive strategy
may be ‘an almost perfect model to redefine sociological theory’s more and more uncertain perspectives’ (1994, p. 33) – cannot but see in the ‘fragmentary character’ of his work the expression of ‘modernity’s crisis’ (1994, p. 39). At the end of the eighteenth century, however, such enthusiasts of modernity as Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis described the kind of ‘new discourse’ apt to ‘discuss the world modernly’ as ‘a system of fragments’ (Rella 1987, p. 28-39) and Simmel is closer to romantic enthusiasm than to defeated retreat from the world, even in the growing consciousness of modernity’s threat to subjectivity. Again, Banfi must be quoted: ‘Relativism has often been accused of being negative towards any practical ideal: Simmel meant to show that, in the pedagogical field, it can support an energetic and healthy practice. First of all, the conscience of education’s vast and radical problem can assume a simply negative sense only for a hard-headed, naïf dogmatism. This problem in fact does not represent a system of difficulties conceived by an external force to hinder pedagogical goodwill, but is a task that life gives to herself’ (1961, p. 193).

For the most part, Simmel’s critics still regard him as an indefinable thinker whose reasonings, objectives and research organization they do not understand. When they try to place them in their cultural frames, they more or less consciously misinterpret them and reach conclusions that, though logical from their viewpoint, do not fit in Simmel’s human and intellectual adventure. One could even have agreed with the old clichés of the aesthetician on the run, the brilliant purveyor of social vignettes – ‘both harmless and of perfect bonhomie’ (Frisby 1992, p. 78) – for German high bourgeoisie, were it not for the existence of another reference frame within which Simmel’s oddities and flaws gain a different meaning and show a new coherence that does not need a system, but is rather ‘individual law’ (Simmel 2001) or ‘internal reason’ (Maffesoli 1996, p. 65–101). From this standpoint, Simmel’s heterodoxy, his essayistic fragmentariness and intellectual wanderlust, his interdisciplinarity, all acquire precise heuristic contours and are revealed as strategies devised on the basis of a clear vision of the intellectual role. Moreover, these are the main reasons for Simmel’s contemporary success not only among social scientists but also among common readers, who enjoy his brilliant and challenging style and his peculiar accord with the Zeitgeist.

Turning criticisms upside down
These same heterodox and innovative traits have been the focus of criticisms against Simmel for quite a while. Now, in the Renaissance, many authors seem to have forgotten about this fact. They use them with no concern for any kind of internal coherence, without any further critical confrontation with theoretical positions that simply do not fit in what is normally perceived as the scientific canon. This strange situation strengthens the impression of Simmel’s alienness within the frames of academic Western culture, of his belonging to another cultural tradition: it is no coincidence that he was the only classical thinker that Parsons could not come to terms with in his famous reinterpretation of European sociology. To make this statement clear, I will now propose a review of these ‘classical’ criticisms that will lead to a different understanding of their raison d’être, by showing that they were meant to discredit a cultural approach that was perceived as a frightful competitor to rationalism.
The first thing I will discuss is Simmel’s inability to compose decent scientific essays. This accusation has obviously nothing to do with the size of his scientific production, which is worth several thousand pages. It refers, instead, to its form. It is a form that finds no legitimate place within the ‘consecrated’ procedures of knowledge elaboration and accumulation. According to these, a scholar has to devise a research project coherent with the scientific sector he belongs to. He then has to pursue it systematically for his entire intellectual life, becoming a specialist and embedding his findings within the shared doctrinary reference frame, which is thus made stronger. The logic that drives each new step must be evident and parallel to the one applied by colleagues, so as not to perturb the regular process of scientific ‘adventure’. Such a method brings about formally similar works, which mostly repeat and reorganize what has already been said. Their particular quality must be found in original reinterpretation or partially new developments.

In other words, procedures shape research and its findings, by suggesting the desirable course and the way in which it must be followed to get a certain kind of results. Procedures, in turn, stem from a specific setting-out of the problem of scientific research that claims to be ‘objective’ and is instead ideologically biased. It is in fact influenced by value issues, by receptions and rejections derived by historical and cultural contingencies and the balance of power. Simmel’s vocation to a particular form of presentation of his theses, seen in the light of this cultural ideal, could not be esteemed and understood. His essays are too short, deal with incongruous subjects by means of concepts and definitions taken from different disciplines. Simmel not only stood against standard procedures, but broke every implicit academic code by showing a respect for others’ discoveries that was deemed an insult by his proper colleagues and an invasion by those same others. The fact that it is still uncertain if he must be considered a sociologist or a philosopher, as he is rejected by both guilds, says a lot about his atopia and the consequences of his research choices.

One wonders, however, why an aesthetician on the run, who wants to forget about the ugliness of the world by attending high-society salons, should adopt behaviours bound to have him ostracized by the scientific community. An amateur thinker should behave differently: he should conform to expectations to be more easily accepted, thus getting a chair, a stable job and economic resources apt to let him live a secluded life. Simmel, instead, keeps on misbehaving in spite of several clear warnings and pays the relative price, both human and professional. Such a conduct requires an explication. The contemporary Simmelian cliché is of no help whatsoever: those who uphold it are not even aware of the problem and propose a contradictory interpretation of the man. Another standpoint must be chosen.

Simmel wrote fragmentary works not by chance or lack of ability, but on purpose. They proceed from the non-systematic (even anti-systematic) inspiration that pervades his oeuvre and requires the adoption of a new form to make evident the originality of its conceptions. Jena romantics had already come this far and other thinkers – influenced by Simmel and like him academic outsiders, such as Benjamin and Goffman – reached the same conclusion. The essay form is therefore a necessary consequence of Simmel’s perception of the novelty of his approach, as ‘the essay can calmly and proudly set its fragmentariness against the petty completeness of scientific exactitude or impressionistic freshness’ (Lukács in Frisby 1992, p. 71). It is a genre akin to Simmel’s being (Harrison 1992). He brings it to astonishing heights.
of realization: his works ‘are distinguished even in their external form from the scientific working community. They are free creations of a free mind that never require reference to the results of predecessors or verification by co-researchers … They are, as it were, autonomous, timeless forms [Gebilde] that, as if enclosed within an invisible frame, preserve the “pathos of distance” in all directions in a proud and exclusive reserve’ (Frischeisen-Köhler in Frisby 1992, p. 70).

The frame image is best picked, as Simmel’s essays are truly works of art. Their irreproducibility put them outside the scientific tradition that bases the so-called ‘objectivity’ of a result on reproducible procedures and methods: it must therefore be stigmatized and rendered innocuous. The same must be done to the author guilty of such charges, because he is dangerous for the orthodox scientific construction: ‘The implication of the essay form as outlined by Lukács and Adorno is that we should not seek in it the kind of conceptual precision that we find in “organised science”’ (Frisby 1992, p. 71). Simmel found no use for such a science: definability and measurability of everything are permanent marks of the Age of Money and must be understood as ‘negative consequences of this new freedom’ (Levine 1991, p. 105) that it gives to man. Simmel does not share the enthusiasm for similar principles: since Über soziale Differenzierung (1989) he aimed at constructing texts that were formally harmonic to their contents. In his vision, significant and signified channel the same meaning on different levels, so it is to be expected that an interest in individuality will be expressed in unique essays, just as every man is unique and not only an interchangeable unit, as monetary equation would have it.

Simmel’s rejection of consolidated research practice as outdated and scarcely useful in heuristic terms is not due to some weakness in the ability to write systematic tomes. It has instead strong theoretical reasons that are opposed by the rest of the scientific community. It is also a question of character, of the constant quest for a superior harmony between intellectual disposition and the tools that it chooses to express itself: ‘The genre that best fits Simmel’s style of thought is the essay, because it allows one to start from a single idea, intuition or, more often than not, a juxtaposition of concepts and develop them along the free trajectories of association and analogy, with no need for a systematic organization meant to reach some definite conclusion’ (Cavalli and Perucchi 1984, p. 10).

If we are dealing with a rejection and not with an incapacity, we are then confronted with a free choice that implies a judgment and the conscience of belonging elsewhere, because, as Weber maintained, science leads a free-willing man to discover that each course of action – even non-action – in the end means taking a stand in favour of certain values and against others. Some of Simmel’s critics would have preferred that he more actively supported what they thought of as a common cause; others found that his implicit taking sides was enough to make him their favourite target: they all share the same Weltanschauung and have to put a stop to the estranging and corrosive ways of the stranger from Berlin.

The opponent against which Simmel fought all his life in his own way slowly appears to be the rationalistic variant of modern culture. From time to time, he has been one of its more fervent critics or a sure supporter, never ceasing to record its pros and cons. He has never been part of it; thus he achieved a distance that allowed him to see clearly which direction changes were leading to and with what consequences. Simmel praised money for the freedom it gave to man, which led to the birth of the modern subject, but he feared what would follow from its becoming a
value in itself. Colonization of every province of life by monetary logic hides risks that its apologists pretend not to notice. Simmel spoke about those risks with equanimity: it is a sign of his intellectual honesty and coherence.

The choice of the essay form could be taken as a confirmation of Simmel’s eclecticism. However, it confirms his being guided by a polar star as well, which he followed by every means he could think of in a wide-scope research project. He would have considered what Adorno says critically about the essay as a list of its merits: ‘Just as it denies what is originally given [Urgegebenheiten], so it refuses the definition of its concepts . . . The essay . . . takes up the anti-systematic impulse into its own procedure and introduces concepts unmodified, “immanently” just as it received them. They are only made more precise through their relationship to one another’ (Adorno in Frisby 1992, p. 71).

Looking at Adorno’s diagnosis through some of Maffesoli’s most cherished categories, we notice that the German philosopher condemns the preference granted to ‘internal reason’ as opposed to the workings of ‘abstract reason’ (Maffesoli 1996, pp. 31–63), concept being one of the latter’s best tools and utilitarianism the climax of its development. Adorno renews, in his own sharp way, a criticism that others echoed with less rigour, perhaps not fully understanding what was at stake. He gets it perfectly: he does not turn to intellectual flaws, but censors the choices that lead one to prefer the essay, as he sees how dangerous they could be for the knowledge model he is part of. This is made clear by his remarks on the pursuit of a non-systematic form of expression and on the different way of constructing concepts and definitions.

What Simmel affirms in his autobiographic Fragment seems to confirm Adorno’s fears and underlines the profound cultural differences between them: ‘It seems to me that the contemporary melting of all that is solid, absolute and eternal in the flux of things, in the historical possibility of change, in the purely psychological reality, can be preserved against unbridled subjectivism and scepticism only by substituting those stable and substantial values with the vital interaction of elements that are doomed to the same never-ending melting away. I saw then central concepts like truth, value, objectivity etc. as interactive realities, as contents of a relativism that did not mean sceptical destruction of every solid element anymore, but instead a warrant against that selfsame destruction by means of a new concept of solidity’ (Simmel in Cavalli and Perucchi 1984, p. 11–12).

Adorno and the culture he stands for demand an ontological stability to be attained through synthetic procedures of abstraction that reach an immobile and eternal hyperuranium. Simmel instead advocates the necessity of discovering the sense and definition of every element in the dynamic tie that binds them all in a given context. It is an extreme form of use of the idea of Wechselwirkung that generates an intrinsic normativity that does not come from an ideal and immutable world whose existence is more and more uncertain. Form springs from relation. It lingers in the constant change of context; more than this, it helps to shape it and influences its evolution, forever reaching new states of equilibrium.

This approach makes no use of nominally universal concepts that cannot comprehend reality’s multiform richness and consider it an accident to be removed. It is an approach that makes a conscious choice in favour of Being against the prescriptive idea of Ought, which, having lost its theoretical basis, appears as ideological. From this point of view, every definition results in a separation from life-flux fecundity, in a form of assassination. Determinatio est negatio. When Simmel
refuses to employ definite concepts, he rejects the idea of system itself in favour of an aesthetic attitude. He means to express dissension from a cultural model based on opposite characters: ‘Modern mind has become more and more calculating. The calculative exactness of practical life which the money economy has brought about corresponds to the ideal of natural science: to transform the world into an arithmetic problem, to fix every part of the world by mathematical formulas. Only money economy has filled the days of so many people with weighing, calculating, with numerical determinations, with a reduction of qualitative values to quantitative ones … Punctuality, calculability, exactness are forced upon life by the complexity and extension of metropolitan existence and are not only most intimately connected with its money economy and intellectualist character. These traits must also colour the contents of life and favour the exclusion of those irrational, instinctive, sovereign traits and impulses which aim at determining the mode of life from within, instead of receiving the general and precisely schematized form of life from without’ (Simmel 2005).

‘Ritual’ criticisms to Simmel's theory are aimed at the implicit judgment he passed on Western ideology. It seems to have hit a nerve. Simmel’s poised attitude gave his works a rare strength; on the other hand, it took away from them any reassuring quality. In a historical phase when there was a desperate need for solace, false promises would have been more welcome than the ambiguous truths Simmel gathered from the observation of society. He deliberately did not try to mend the world’s fragmentariness or to find a remedy to reality’s inconsistence. This hurt his pupils and friends – not to mention his detractors – who could not stand to face a terrible conjuncture with no theoretical aid. Bloch fell out with him. George wrote for him an almost insulting stanza. Lukács first followed, then demolished him. Kracauer criticized the inconcludent character of his approach. However, if these readings can be understood from people living in Germany in the 20s of the twentieth century, it is hard to believe that someone can still share them after eighty years. Only more so when you find out that the same discourse that supports them ends up in depriving them of any credibility, reinforcing the impression that emotions are at play here that no rationality can shake.

Dal Lago – in line with the authors mentioned above – notes that ‘post WW1 Germany was no place for disenchanted analysis, ambivalence or pessimism. According to the title of Spengler’s pamphlet it was rather a place for “decisions”. During the pre-Nazism years, German debate on modernity and its destiny gets ideologically polarized’ (1994, p. 137). Soon after, however, Dal Lago observes: ‘In Spengler’s The Decline of the West … the entire closing chapter, devoted to the “world of economic life forms”, betrays since its title an influence from Philosophie des Geldes, although the only sociologist and social historian cited is Sombart. A page of The Decline, moreover, seems to echo, literally but more weakly, the simmelian essay on the metropolis’ (1994, p. 139).

Criticizing Simmel’s oscillation and indecision does not seem to prevent an unscrupulous employment of his intuitions. His influence – although often denied – makes itself apparent in other faultfinders: ‘On the opposite side of Spengler’s historical synthesis, Bloch’s first important works … bear evident traces of Simmel’s teachings’ (Dal Lago 1994, p. 140). As time goes by, Bloch gets farther and farther away from his ancient professor, to the point of not even citing him in
an invective against the ‘weak relativism’ of his own time, of which Simmel was wrongly reputed to be an exponent.

An author who, for a change, admits to a strong Simmelian influence is Kracauer, ‘among the first to glimpse the importance of simmelian sociology, even as he criticizes, from a phenomenological point of view, its psychologism. He thought that Simmel’s sociology – with his vocation for microscopical enquiries – could trace an excellent way of access to reality. Kracauer perfectly singled out the innovative element of Simmel’s approach, its way of adhering to things without dissolving them in a totality and also the peculiar restlessness of his philosophical position. Simmel’s eclecticism, his wandering among the phenomenical world’s infinite details, appeared to him much closer to modern reality than traditional philosophical or sociological systems. Adherence to things with no mediation and wanderlust also betrayed, in Kracauer’s view, the weakness of Simmel’s philosophical construction’ (Dal Lago 1994, p. 142).

This judgment, like Adorno’s, comes from a position that – far from Kracauer’s conscious intentions – is much more academic and orthodox than Simmel’s, as it is still tightly bound to philosophy’s veritative mission. Simmel’s wanderings are always considered as the sign of an attention incapable of following its rigid and almost predefined course to the end. They should instead be thought of as explorations free from the constriction of one reason, of one reality, an art of wandering that needs apprenticeship. Benjamin says: ‘Not to be able to get one’s bearing in a city does not mean much, whereas to lose oneself in it, like one gets lost in a labyrinth, is a thing you have to learn from the start’. Balzac adds that ‘wandering is a science’. It seems that modernity’s great literature and great thought have been but an immense search for this science, every single trace of which was lost after Frühromantik’s concept of arabesque was engulfed’ (Rella 1987, p. 126).

On other occasions Kracauer’s judgment on Simmel is much more negative. Frisby cites several cases: ‘This philosophy is not the world view of a person motivated by powerful ideas but rather the incursion of a self-less person into the world’ (1992, p. 1). One can follow Simmel as long as a single method is concerned, without caring much about the intellectual constellation that gave it birth. If one tries to make that method part of a different reference frame, however, misinterpretation cannot be avoided: not only does Simmel’s philosophical system show several flaws, but Simmel as a man is to be blamed, as he cannot make up his mind or commit himself to any cause whatsoever. He is just another weathervane spinning in the wind. Kracauer feels that such an ethical fragility is no longer acceptable, no more than philosophical babbling on Life and stuff like that: ‘We feel irrevocably separated from an epoch that took life emptied of meaning as the ultimate driving force of human existence and that, rootless as it was, possessed no goal and no reason’ (Kracauer in Frisby 1992, p. 13).

Bloch and Kracauer are among those responsible for Simmel’s oblivion, on whose opinion a large part of the unfriendly stereotypes are based. Strangely enough, it is a selective oblivion we are dealing with, as it regards Simmel’s name, but not his theories and methods. They keep on exerting a strong influence on his former pupils, so much so that, when the enthusiasm for the philosophical revolution they strove for wanes, an unexpected thing happens: ‘Nowadays, of course, we see the revolutionary turn in Weimarian philosophy under a different and more modest light. If we still read profitably these authors, it is certainly not for their adhesion to
Marxism . . . but for an analytic and descriptive capacity (this is specifically the case with Bloch and Kracauer) in which the scope of Simmel’s teachings makes itself evident’ (Dal Lago 1994, p. 146).

In other words, Bloch and Kracauer are worth reading only for the Simmelian quality of their works, but they are still to be trusted as Simmel’s foremost critics . . .

It would be easy to gather examples of such contradictions, especially by devoting oneself to finding Simmelian suggestions in authors and books that make no mention of him. If we were to apply to these authors the same rules that were applied to Simmel, we should find them guilty of ambivalence and declare them scientifically unreliable. Scientific thought has no place for contradiction: according to it, it marks an error as thought must develop in a straight, coherent line and no conclusion can ever deny its premises. The fact that this is often the case in reality, where objects and behaviours serve simultaneously opposite ends, seems to make no difference, although several authors have pointed to its relevance for social sciences: Dahrendorf (1990), who has never been accused of heterodoxy; Macioti (2002), who stresses the importance of the opposing and coexisting dimensions of structure and action in the concept of ‘role; Simmel himself, speaking of the modal phenomenon (1995b) or of the implicit dynamics hidden in the images of windows and doors (1957).

The variants of modern culture

As it serves one of Western culture’s key strategies, the choice in favour of the non-contradiction principle made by Aristotle has gradually become an unassailable dogma. It affirms the imperfect character of a riotous and paradoxical reality and justifies its substitution with a euphemized image, not to mention the necessity of a heavier and heavier techno-political intervention in order to mend its flaws. Reality and its rational, orderly image must coincide, which leaves no room for what does not conform to the exigencies of the logos: in short, for what mostly concerns Simmel.

Following in the wake of romantic geniuses such as Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel, he made extensive use of paradoxical images and reasonings, getting closer to Eastern philosophical traditions and marking once more his distance from a culture whose prescriptive frenzy he did not share. Simmel feels that knowledge is comprehension. The ‘simple’ fact of existence confers dignity upon reality. It is a dignity that current cognitive procedures do not acknowledge. This primal positive character should be the starting point for any heuristic act that could subsequently modify reality in accordance with its laws and not on the basis of a totally heterogeneous design. This is what divides Simmel from his opponents and grants the opportunity to turn another criticism upside down. He is not a pessimistic, brooding fellow: instead, he has an optimistic vision of man and his potentialities that stems from his conception of Life, the strength of which comes from the fact that with its own movement it produces what is right and the fullness of value (Simmel 1912). Thus, man must act in the world in accord with an understanding of Life’s process, as reality is no more a simple background for human epos, but it concurs in its development through an unceasing, sense-giving relation.

The alternative reading of Simmel’s shortcomings hints at the existence of another Western culture, to which he belongs. It is a possibility that must now be investigated. First of all, we have to keep in mind that this very possibility threatens
one of common sense’s most established certitudes, the fact that Western culture is to be understood as a homogeneous and coherent whole. In the media-induced imaginary it seems to loom on the world, dispensing beneficial effects or punishing those who still refuse it. The main character of this representation is that it is an unambiguous culture and is the least common denominator of the riotous Western world, to which it guarantees mutual understanding and harmony. This tale, in its aproblematic absoluteness, lets efforts and resources rally in defence of the Shared Culture and bestows an identity against more or less malevolent strangers (barbarians?) These are only a few of its many functions: in fact it feeds an ideal tone in which pride and historical memory, ethical needs and true aspirations to a universal vision blend. However, it is also a dangerous mix, easily made to serve specific ends that master and exploit its symbolic power. The tale turns into a weapon that hegemonic culture wields to deny the very existence of viable alternatives to its rule and to impose its vision of the world as the only possible one. What Weber called ‘a finite section of the senseless infinitude of the becoming of the world’ crystallizes and loses its dynamic, instrumental nature to become the revelation of an eternal truth.

The actual landscape of a culture is profoundly different from the peaceful, uniform scenario that usually comes to mind. When you look at it without the acritical acceptation of the obvious, it promptly reveals its ideological character: daily experience is made of conflicts and more or less emphasized differences. It is hard to think that such an array of dissonances could be referred to a single matrix, a single set of values. To pretend so is an illusion, a survival strategy in an otherwise chaotic and featureless environment. This (self)-deception is confirmed whenever you get to scratch the coat of homogeneity or stumble into authors who put forward different ideas and interpretations. They wake up the need or the longing for a way to look at things that could transcend the simple dimension of their instrumentality, to get again to the pleasure and shiver of surprise: ‘The Dasein must stumble into the unusability of the usable. Only when the usable can thus raise “surprise”, revealing itself as “inopportune” and “pert”, the Dasein wakes to the idea that the world cannot be reduced to the simple measurement of entities’ (Fornari 2002, p. 98).

It is an optimistic stance that denies the negative judgment implicit in quantitative culture and aims at getting back in accord with the world, acknowledged as a context coessential to human existence without which no harmonic development can ever be successful. The same optimism marks the attention and care for the subject: he/she sheds any contemporary qualitative vagueness to truly become the unicum everyone seems to be talking about nowadays. He/she is responsible for a Beruf (calling) that belongs only to him/her and gives the original measure of his/her relation to the world and to the others. These peculiar traits come to this different cultural variant through an original development.

For a start, we must go back to one of the main turning-points of Western culture evolution: the Enlightenment. It coincides with the appearance of a new set of ideas/values that Dumont calls ‘individualist configuration’. This set is radically different from those that came before it: ‘Without trying to be exhaustive, we shall consider the following as general traits or architectural elements: individualism (as opposed to holism); supremacy of relations with things (as opposed to supremacy of relations with men); absolute distinction between subject and object (as opposed to a merely relative, fluctuating one); segregation of values from facts and ideas (as opposed to
a non-distinction or combination between them); organization of knowledge on independent, homologous and homogeneous plans and disciplines’ (Dumont 1991, p. 20).

If we stop and consider these characteristics, we realize that we are confronting dichotomies that can easily be applied to what was said about the critical debate on Simmel. It has been made clear that Simmel opposed the division of knowledge in autonomous, non-communicating specializations. *Wechselwirkung* can be interpreted as a re-establishment of the central role of inter-human relations against the supremacy of money-organized relations with objects. Moreover, it gives origin to an interweaving of relations so tight and meaningful as to confer on the subject a remarkable importance. It is not the absolute relevance preached by individualism: it is tempered by the influence of the life-context in which the subject acts, structured by qualitative relations with other human beings and objects charged with emotional and aesthetic undertones that make them something other than consumeristic goods.

Such a reasoning could be criticized as conservative. Dumont, with his list, opposes traditional societies, hierarchic and hard on individual freedom, to modernity and its accent on individual independence: the modern subject is free from any kind of constriction, whether emotional, economic or legislative. Dumont seems to prefer the former formula. He could be one of a kind with Tönnies and his longing for *Gemeinschaft* or with Parsons and his systematic passion… It is an objection largely based on the myth and ideology of Progress, but this notwithstanding it could make sense if Dumont and his fellow critics of contemporary Western culture actually proposed to get back to the good old ways. What they do is merely to suggest alternative lines of development able to salvage a few elements of reality that the predominant paradigm cannot fit in its representations, thus setting in motion disgregating effects on social tissue. As their critics cannot understand their premises, they interpret their positions on the basis of their own vision of the world, thus misunderstanding them, as has been shown to be the case with Simmel. As they cannot conceive of a coexistence of different paradigms, they think of such proposals as aiming ultimately at the instauration of a new monopoly.

On the contrary, Dumont deeply problematizes his position. He describes an intercultural dynamic that goes beyond the individualism/holism dichotomy. It relies on multi-level representations that allow a constant flux of exchange among different cultures, the existence of which has up to now gone unnoticed. Dumont observes that the set of modern values, for the first time ever, appears to be deterritorialized, that is to say independent from any specific cultural context, and pretends to be universal, valid for any possible historical case with no consideration of its peculiarities. However, when it gets the upper hand, it does so against former cultural configurations that are all of a traditional, holistic type. It is not a process of predominance that takes place in a kind of *res nullius*, in a political and social void close to anomy, but rather a dynamic process of clash and encounter through which several original configurations come into existence. The ideological version of the winner affirms that the final issue of such a complicated series of events is the simple, total hegemony of modernity, which brings about lots of lamentations on cultural globalization and loss of difference. According to Dumont, relations between modernity and former traditional cultures can be described through a vast range of solutions: whereas the modern set of values takes over specific sectors of social life – the economic and the political spheres – it leaves the old ways in charge of the rest.
Subterranean contacts between paradigms and the different weight of their influence lead to the shaping of national variants of modern configuration. Each traditional culture, confronted with the new constellation of values, cannot passively accept its primacy. It has to devise strategies of resistance and adaptation that finally change it into something new, a new figure in the now shared universe of modernity. In the throes of this process, it builds representations which help it maintain an inner sense and achieve a synthesis between two orders of values, on one hand the holistic, autochthonous ones; on the other hand those coming from the individualistic configuration: ‘These new representations have two sides, one inward-bound, particularistic, self-justifying; the other outward-bound, universalistic, modernity-compliant. The key circumstance no one noticed until now and my analysis brings to light is this: thanks to their universalistic side, these products of a particular culture’s acculturation can become part of the predominant culture, the world culture of the time’ (Dumont 1991, p. 29).

The so-called common culture hides inside itself contradictory ideals and concepts that can be differently decoded depending on the chosen symbolic reference frame. The Wechselwirkung between global culture and local variants is complex: from time to time it re-enacts the initial opposition from which it started, but this happens in a spiral movement where circumstances change according to the acculturation process. Global culture, however, works on a dichotomic logic that does not allow it to see (or think of) the existence and necessity of these exchanges. They go on clandestinely, while there is no official contact and the representatives of traditional cultures are reduced to silence. This model accurately describes the ‘strange’ behaviour Simmel’s critics adopted towards him: they made extensive use of his ideas, while publicly denying their validity. Simmel is then better understood as a representative of the German variant of modern configuration, one of the most lively and original thanks to the great value it credits to intellectual enterprise and to the peculiarities of its historical development.

One of the main causes of its original character is to be found in the strong impact that Luther’s preaching had on it. It affirmed an explicit negative judgment on all worldly matters, whereas it conferred on the subject a new freedom and responsibility where contact with the transcendental was concerned. Thus Protestantism realizes, through these cornerstones, an unusual combination of individualistic and holistic characters. It confers spiritual autonomy to the subject without putting to the test his participation in the social community, highly prized in German culture. With his doctrine, however, Luther moves God farther and farther away from this world and leaves man alone in the ‘desert of metaphysical infinity’ (Dumont 1991, p. 102), taking away every form of solace for his existential anxieties. Man stands before a stern and distant god, who gives no instrument of salvation nor has ministers with whom to establish an emotional, human link. As time goes by, the faithful can bear this strain less and less and look for other ways to cope with it: without changing their allegiance, they shape its ideas into new forms with the aid of influences coming from other nations and cultures, which are taken in and mediated in previously unknown ways.

This is no place to delve into the deep processes from which Pietism finally issued, whose substantial influence on the making of German classic culture is today widely recognized. It is enough to say that, through its action, the Lutheran legacy affects subsequent cultural movements, first of all Romanticism (D’Andrea 2005,
Moreover, it lends to German culture its outstanding ability to build the cross-cultural representations Dumont discovered. Proof of their existence and importance in cultural processes can be found, for instance, in Simmel’s discussion of the two forms of individualism (Simmel 1995a). In the essay Die beiden Formen des Individualismus, Simmel describes the alternation and cohabitation, within Western culture, of two irreductable conceptions of individualism, one that places man totally inside his self, free from every tie, but interprets this self as the universally human self, one and the same in everyone; the other that upholds the idea that human difference is a moral exigence and that everyone has to fulfil an ideal image of him/herself that is unique. Individualism of equality and individualism of inequality show clearly that the same term (representation, according to Dumont) can have contradictory meanings and that its correct understanding is impossible without an analysis and comprehension of its context.

The fact of the existence of cross-representations has interesting consequences: it brings to light the circumstance that several cultural configurations are always striving to assert themselves within a given scenario; it offers a new standpoint to examine the ways in which an author is accepted or rejected, a standpoint from which Simmel’s work and fortune are better understood; it opens uncharted territories to sociological investigation: individuation and description of working cross-representations could be an effective strategy to further the understanding of contemporary social life and to solve a few problems that seem to affect international cohabitation more and more deeply.

Notes

1. Hermeneutics considers every possible approach to a text founded on the existence, in its author, of pre-judgments and pre-texts that frame it: ‘Far from affirming the purification or unification of the possible viewpoints, hermeneutics acknowledges the productivity of the different interpretive circuits thus established’ (Dal Lago 1985, p. 485). This is what Maffesoli calls ‘dynamic rooting’ in the classics: to employ canonical authors to gain a fresh understanding of contemporaneity without becoming their prisoner. This should be obtained, however, by ‘textual fidelity and probity, that is to say adherence to what an author wrote’ (Dal Lago 1985, p. 485). It is an adherence that does not hinder the interpretive act, nor what Gadamer calls ‘fusion of horizons’. Moreover, a fundamental coherence between the author’s life and statements and the image of it that results from the new readings should be required, as an application of the exigence of dynamic equilibrium that has often been criticized in Simmel as relativism and is now better understood by some critics as ‘relationism’: the contextual logic according to which freedom is tempered by ties intrinsic to a situation, either in everyday life or in a cultural climate.

2. Atopia, as Plato affirms in his Symposium, is ‘the character [of a thing] that does not fit ... within the human categories of common experience’ (Rella 1987, p. 9). In this sense, Socrates is atopic, embarrassing. And Simmel shares this character. Even their destinies are similar. The process of euphemization that has been going on in Western culture for millennia, leading to symbolic sacrifice and thus transforming the deadly challenge of the enigma in the rite of dialectics, prevents the latter from being killed, but this has only a practical significance: Socrates’ death is a rougher figure of Simmel’s limbo, but his removal from the history of culture is identically effective. He is denied the status of proper thinker, he is treated as an amateur sociologist, a little goofy with the wild disarray of his interests and his asystematic thought. No one accepts his self-definition as a philosopher, no one risks an unprejudiced confrontation with him. In this, he is in good company: even though the largest part of his work is undeniably philosophic, Novalis is still mentioned only as a poet ‘on the basis, perhaps – as Rella writes for the similar case of Giacomo Leopardi – of
the fact that a poet is easier to face down than a great asystematic philosopher’ (1987, p. 44).

References