

**Simmel's (Non-Human) Humanism:
On Simmel's 'Ethics of Endings and Futures'**

I

Simmel's Contemporary Relevance

Given the recent non-human turn in sociology and the social sciences, the popularity of theories of entanglement, and contemporary concern with the concept of the anthropocene, it is easy to forget that classical sociology was always-already aware of the relationship between humanity and non-humanity. Although Daniel Chernilo focuses upon the debate between Sartre and Heidegger in his recent *Debating Humanity* (2017), and contrasts Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1947 / 2007) with Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism* (1947 / 1998) to frame his exploration of the limits of the human in contemporary theory, we could easily locate the same concern with the human and its relationship to the non-human in Marx, Tarde, and centrally for the purposes of this article, Simmel.

As John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett (2017) have recently shown, Marx's critique of capitalism was essentially founded upon a theory of the alienation of humanity from nature and its participation in non-human ecological systems. After Marx, and towards the end of the 19th century, Tarde set out a 'universal sociology' to reflect the social dimension of existence itself in his *Monadology and Sociology* (1893 / 2012). According to this theory everything, including cosmological bodies, are implicated in the social, understood in its broadest possible sense. I think we find

a similar theory running through Simmel's work from his classic *The Philosophy of Money* (1900 / 2011) through his *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* (1907 / 2011) up to his final work *The View of Life* (1918 / 2015). In these works ideas of relationality, becoming, and the implication of humanity in life in itself are central and show how it is possible to re-read Simmel's classical sociology for the present where sociologists have come to understand that we can no longer separate human society and the humanised world from nature, the environment, and what Eugene Thacker (2011) calls the (non-human) planet. As Matthias Gross (2001) has shown, long before Chernilo's attempt to fuse sociology and philosophy Simmel had already imagined a 'philosophical sociology', 'sociological philosophy', or 'sociological metaphysics' capable of understanding the world in terms of infinite relationality and the co-participation of the human and non-human in existence.

Based upon this insight concerning the relevance of Simmel's work for understanding our 'entangled present', the purpose of this article is to explore Simmel's work and recent interpretations of his sociology that seek to project Simmelian thought into the future in significantly different ways. To this end in the following section of the article I seek to understand Simmel's contemporary relevance through the lens of Finnish sociologist Oli Pyyhtinen's (2018) recent work on the Simmelian legacy. Here, I compare and contrast Pyyhtinen's (2015) 'more-than-human' sociology with his (2018) reading of Simmel's influence upon the sociological tradition, before moving on to explore Gregor Fitzzi's (2018) focus on Simmel's ethics in individualism in the third section of the paper. While there is a sense in which this focus on self-making traps Simmel inside an endless struggle between the hypertrophy of the social form and atrophy of the desperate individual

and in the process conjures the idea of Simmel as a kind of proto-existentialist, Tom Kemple (2018) seeks to explode this opposition through an exploration of Simmel's religiosity. This reading of Kemple, which imagines the identity of self and society and the emergence of a 'comprehensive culture' that unifies subjective and objective culture, concludes the third section of the article. Finally, in the conclusion to the piece, I take up David Beer's (2019) recent reading of Simmel's final works in order to consider his apocalyptic non-human humanism, which I suggest represents Simmel's key contribution to contemporary sociological concerns relating to specifically moving beyond the looming catastrophe of the anthropocene and 'our' post-human humanism that offers no kind of future at all.

II

Simmel and Strangeness

In his *More-Than-Human Sociology* (2015), Olli Pyyhtinen writes about the need for sociology to think beyond the human and understand relationality in non-human terms. While this short work clearly develops Simmel's approach through reference to Latour, Deleuze and Guattari, and the influence of non-human philosophy, I think that it also raises questions about the relevance of Simmel's thought to the contemporary moment, relating specifically to the ethics of humanism, post-humanism, and non-humanism and the problem of moving beyond what we might call the limit of the anthropocene. Reversing this focus on the future, in his recent book *The Simmelian Legacy* (2018) Pyyhtinen's concern is with Simmel's past and his place in the history of the discipline of sociology itself. In this respect we might say that *The Simmelian Legacy* is about exploring what Simmel left behind for future readers to understand their contemporary and tracing the hidden pre-history of what might eventually become a potential more-than-human sociology. Pyyhtinen's question is, therefore, about what in Simmel's work lives on beyond the boundary of his death and can contribute to understandings of the present. This is ultimately a question about the future.

In order to unearth Simmel's influence, Pyyhtinen starts by noting the relative obscurity of Simmel in the sociological canon, his lack of heirs, and the lack of a recognisable Simmelian school. Of course, Simmel saw this coming himself, predicting that his work would become 'cold cash' for his interpreters who would read

fragments, but never recognise the value of his overall project. Despite this view, however, Pyyhtinen's point is to trace the more or less hidden influence of Simmel's work on a range of thinkers from Park through to Latour in order to reveal a kind of Simmelian unconscious in the history of sociology that we might excavate to realise the idea of infinite relationality and a new vision of the discipline appropriate to understanding the present. In what follows I want to read Pyyhtinen's reading of Simmel in order to try to tease out a possible Simmelian ethics for the contemporary moment marked by potential catastrophe and endings. Thus my objective is to read out from the Simmelian legacy to imagine how we might use his work to understand our possible future.

Before exploration of Simmel's influence upon later sociology, which occupies the second half of the book, Pyyhtinen starts by explaining the theoretical value of Simmel's approach. In his view Simmel's work remains essential for understanding the present and challenging dominant models for thinking about the social for three key reasons. First (1), he explains that Simmel focuses upon the concrete, seeking to understand its place in the wider world, by emphasising second (2), the centrality of relationality to existence. For Simmel, there is no unity in itself, but only endless interactions that produce formal structures fated to give way to flux, becoming, and the dynamic forces of life in turn. In the respect, Pyyhtinen locates the roots of Simmel's 'philosophical sociology', and perhaps his central interest for the contemporary, in the ways in which his work (3) searches for 'eternity in the everyday'. That is to say that the everyday formal structures that we (humans) experience hide the eternity of flux and relationality that, in Simmel's view, will always end up breaking through the boundaries that ensure the (temporary) integrity

of form. Philosophy becomes essentially sociological in this respect because of its emphasis on the relational nature of being, while sociology is philosophical primarily because it relies on a vision of the ontological nature of relationality that comprises a kind of sociological unconscious beneath everyday life where 'we' (humans) experience unitary form and social stability.

Explaining the challenge of Simmel's sociology, Pyyhtinen notes that relationality is never static, but rather endlessly mobile and dynamic, and thus critical of visions of the discipline that imagine the social as a container of individuals. Beyond this critique of reification, Simmel's sociology is also unlike Marxist theories inspired by Hegelian dialectics, where relations move through history in a logical, reasonable manner, simply because there is no plan, and centrally no moment of reconciliation in Simmel's thought. There is no final synthesis, no end of history, at least in Pyyhtinen's reading of Simmel. Instead, Pyyhtinen emphasises the importance of 'the third' in Simmel's work, which famously takes the form of money in *The Philosophy of Money* (1900 / 2011) and the figure of the stranger in the book, *Soziologie* (1908 / 2009) (also see Simmel, 1972). Although the stranger is often thought about in terms of a tendency towards objectification operative in modernity or the alienation of urban life, Pyyhtinen's reading shows how the stranger is also representative of Simmel's wider methodological approach which consists in understanding the strangeness and constructedness of everyday life (form) and the way this shapes experience and, in his later work, life itself.

Thus we can see how Simmel picks up and develops Kant's philosophy of transcendental idealism and the thing in itself and projects this onto the level of the

social where form contrasts with experience or life which is inaccessible in itself. This is why, from Simmel's point of view, it is easy to mistake form for the thing in itself and the sociologist must constantly remind themselves that the lens that enables them to understand social life (the idea of society) is only ever a (static) representation of endless relationality. In Simmel's universe the relational dimension is absolute. As Pyyhtinen (2018) notes, following Bourdieu (1998: 3), 'the real is relational'. While this might lead us to conclude that Simmel reduces the social to individual psychology or at least the interaction between individuals experiencing and thinking about the social world, Pyyhtinen explains that the point of the idea of absolute relationality is to show how the individual is itself a product of social interactions before it imagines its own formal integrity and reflects upon the social as a thing 'out there'. The individual is, therefore, also a construct founded upon relationality.

Following this point, Pyyhtinen rehearses Simmel's key a priori for the existence of social that show how (formless) experience translates into form, which in the end leads us to imagine that society is an objective thing or container that somehow 'holds' individuals. In this way Simmel's a priori for the existence of social life – (1) the generalisation of the other in formal roles that always leave a remainder of individuality; (2) the opposition of the social and individual strangeness; and (3) the integration of social and individual through vocation – create the conditions for the emergence of a radically alienated society, characterised by the atrophy of individual, subjective life and the hypertrophy of collective, objective world or what Simmel (1911 / 1997) calls 'the tragedy of culture'. In identifying this process with modernity, we might move on to explore Simmel's work on the city (1903 / 1997),

where the alienation of humans from objective culture is writ large, and fashion (1904 / 1997), which is about more than clothes and revolves around the dynamics of endless change, formation, and what Pyyhtinen (2018) explains in terms of the interplay of processes of 'being, not being, and not yet being'. The point here is that the idea of fashion turns off the possibility of being up-to-date (in fashion) in a dynamic system that means one is always already out-of-date (out of fashion) and caught up endlessly trying to catch up and become fashionable.

In this state of modern dis-ease and dis-comfort, this state of endless 'not yet being', Simmel's point is that the only way for individuals to survive is to intellectualise their situation and impose distance upon their relationship to the world. In his famous essay on the psychology of metropolitan life Simmel (1903 / 1997) captures this sense of distance towards the world in what he calls the blasé attitude and connects this to the dominance of the money economy, where all sense of content and particular quality gives way to form and a universal measure based upon quantitative value. Although Simmel thought that this hypertrophy of objective life might open up a space for subjectivity and individual life, it must be debatable whether this is the case today where the obsession with money that characterises neoliberal culture seems to empty every kind of individual qualitative valuation of its purchase upon the world in the emergence of what Lupton (2016) calls 'the quantified or quantitative self'. Pyyhtinen clearly recognises this fatal possibility, noting that in Simmel's theory of money there is no value beyond consumer desire and the distance between the potential consumer and the object of their desire, but I think he skims over the potentially apocalyptic effects of this situation, which Simmel revealed and contemporary writers such as Bernard Stiegler (2011, 2012, 2014) have made clear

in works concerned with the ongoing crisis of capitalism as a value or belief system. In this respect, Gregor Fitzi (2018) is potentially better on the impact of the rise of objective culture on individuals who lose all sense of their place in the world than Pyyhtinen who tends to skate over the profound problem of money and the reduction of all quality to quantitative measure.

It is clear that Simmel recognises the problem of quantity in his explanation of the way money becomes the ultimate (empty) object of desire - which is at once infinitely desirable because of its lack of quality and at the same time entirely empty of the kind of content that might inspire social commitment because of the same void of meaning - and that this informs his theory of the nihilism of the money economy. It is precisely this theory, where the ultimate means of exchange (and relationality) abolishes the possibility of valuable ends and becomes a kind of empty end in itself (the only purpose, the only end of money is endless circulation), that I think we find in Stiegler (2014) today, though he never refers to Simmel, preferring to lean on Weber and the idea of disenchantment. Although Pyyhtinen (2018) never traces similarities between Simmel's work and Stiegler's critique of late capitalism, these are clearly present and demonstrate the contemporary relevance of reading the former's work. For example, in much the same way that Stiegler imagines an anomic world of uncontrollable individuals (see Stiegler, 2012) paradoxically bound together by a lack of connection, Simmel's (1903 / 1997) theory of modern, urban, money society characterised by suffocating proximity and infinite distance might be seen to trace the pre-history of the form of drive-based consumer capitalism Stiegler critiques across his works on disbelief and discredit. Where Stiegler (2012, 2016) writes of the lonely dis-individual lost in an automatic society, Simmel similarly

understands the relationality of loneliness. In the modern money society he explores, the condition of individual loneliness is not simply about being on one's own, not about being outside of social relations, but rather concerned with a kind of negative relationality, defined by an awareness of the presence of others marked by a complete lack of subjective connection (see Pyyhtinen, 2009). The state of loneliness is, therefore, essential to what it means to be a stranger and the stranger is a kind of archetypal modernist who has the potential to theorise the social on the basis of their alienation. This is, of course, Pyyhtinen's (2018) point about Simmel's strange methodology and I think his key focus for understanding Simmel's relevance to the present.

However, even though Pyyhtinen (2018) notes that we might translate Simmel's essential stranger, the Jew, into the contemporary refugee who exists on the very edge of global society, I think that he misses an opportunity to show how we are all strange in contemporary society and strangeness is in a sense *wired* into the very nature of social life today. As Sherry Turkle (2011) points out, perhaps the fundamental mode of strangeness today is that which we encounter online when we engage with others who seem absolutely proximate and ever present, but also entirely distant and completely remote. I think this is an important example to raise because it illustrates a key point that Pyyhtinen moves on to highlight, which is that strangeness is not simply about this, that, or the other outsider identity and difference from an insider group defined by sameness, but rather a kind of ontological distance hardwired into the mediated nature of the social itself. This is a point that Bob Copper (2010) similarly highlights in his study of the notion of distance in Simmel's work, where a degree of separation, alienation, and estrangement are

inscribed within the nature of existence. Despite this missed opportunity to think about Simmel in the context of online culture, however, Pyyhtinen's point is well made: we are never entirely social, never completely transparent to the other, but rather always strange to some essential degree. In its most radical form this sense of strangeness emerges from the contrast between the absolutely objective (where the other is a thing) and absolutely subjective (where the self cannot see beyond its own horizons) ways of being that Simmel thinks ends up characterising modern society.

At this point Pyyhtinen (2018) imagines an alternative, utopian form of relationality based upon playful interaction where cynical distance and self-absorption fade before a more open mode of being with that recalls his earlier work on the gift (see Pyyhtinen, 2016). Unfortunately Pyyhtinen does not develop this section of the book, or tease out what Simmelian thought might contribute to political or ethical understandings of the present, and the work of thinking through what we might call Simmel's utopianism is left to Tom Kemple (2018) who, I think, picks up on the possibility of overcoming strangeness and the separation of objectivity and subjectivity in his own recent study of Simmel. In Pyyhtinen's (2018) case, the failure to interrogate or focus on the possibility of a humanised society beyond profane objectivity is the result of his intention to outline Simmel's legacy across the history of sociology. But by comparison to the first part of the book, which sets out his understanding of Simmel's over-arching theory and very effectively responds to the standard view of the fragmentary nature of his writing, I think this section of the work is less successful, primarily because it is not structured by the kind of insight that organises Goodstein's (2017) recent study of Simmel's liminal relation to the disciplinary imagination. Although Pyyhtinen clearly recognises this key point, noting

Simmel's strangeness vis-à-vis sociology early in the book, the structure of the text and the compartmentalisation of the historical study of Simmel's impact upon the discipline in the final part of the work, means that it tends to lose momentum and become a much more traditional historical study that takes theoretical content and disciplinary context separately, rather than together in such a way that uses the interaction between content and form to drive the narrative of the work forward to really show how Simmel might contribute to understandings of the contemporary or future possibilities. In this sense Pyyhtinen never completely reveals Simmel's legacy and centrally leaves the political and ethical potential of his thought for others to explore. Moving beyond this section of the article, where I have shown how Pyyhtinen roots his reading of Simmel in concepts of relationality and strangeness, but never explicitly articulates the ways in which these ideas might inform our understandings of the present, in the following section I look to compare and contrast Gregor Fitzi (2018) and Tom Kemple (2018) on the basis of their Simmelian ethics founded upon on the one hand, individualism and on the other hand, sociability / religiosity.

III

Simmel's Individual and Social Ethics

If Pyyhtinen's (2018) focus is Simmel's legacy and the ways in which his work has been read forward up to Latour and non-human sociology, then Gregor Fitzi's book, *The Challenge of Modernity: Simmel's Sociological Theory* (2018) seeks to counter readings of Simmel that emphasise the fragmentary nature of his thought (including, David Frisby's (see for example, Frisby, 2014) classic work). In this respect, Fitzi seeks to explain the system behind Simmel's exploration of the fragments of modernity and show how his work develops around a critique of objectivity and ethic of individual subjectivity. Given this objective, it may appear paradoxical that Fitzi starts by explaining that there is no monstrous system in Simmel's work, but rather an endlessly complex web of interactions that build, break, and re-build social forms ad infinitum. However, following Pyyhtinen, Fitzi explains that 'the problem of the system' emerges in Simmel's work through (1) a theory of the mis-recognition of form, which is mistaken for a thing in itself, rather than a complex web of relations that are endlessly shifting, and (2) exploration of the consequent process of objectification that sees the imagined social thing start to dominate the individuals who ultimately founded it. Although Pyyhtinen and Fitzi make the same point in this respect, Fitzi tends to place far more emphasis on this issue and essentially makes his study of Simmel's exploration of potential political / ethical responses to this situation the centrepiece of his book. According to Fitzi, then, Simmel's basic problem of modernity, what he calls 'the challenge of modernity', revolves around

responding to the atrophy of individual, subjective culture in the face of the hypertrophy of objective culture brought about by the domination of money.

Given this focus, the key innovation of Fitzi's (2018) book, and what separates it from the other recent works on Simmel, is that he explores the psychological impacts of the atrophy of subjective culture upon the individual. Against the backdrop of emerging Freudianism in the late 19th century and early 20th century, Fitzi shows how the problem of Simmel's individual revolves around (1) their inability to identify with the objective social system that seems to tower over them and (2) build a coherent sense of self inside these structures which feel increasingly alien and meaningless from a human perspective. At this point Fitzi notes Simmel's concept of 'lifestyle' or 'styles of life' (1900 / 2011). Here, the lonely, alienated individual responds to their situation in the modern, money economy by seeking to make use of the objects that surround them to try to build some sense of self. However, Fitzi explains that Simmel's view of lifestyle and consumer culture in a wider sense is essentially tragic by suggesting that it is not possible to create a true sense of self from objects that essentially identify one with everybody else who is playing the same game. Thus Fitzi shows how Simmel imagined the original mass consumer society comprising the identikit figures Adorno and Horkheimer (1997) would later write about in terms of the lines of pseudo-individuals endlessly struggling to become somebody in a society of nobodies. Although Pyyhtinen (2018) similarly explores the dynamics of fashion in Simmel, the real strength of Fitzi's (2018) work is that he shows how Simmel connects the dynamics of fashion, consumer culture, and lifestyle to the individual who finds themselves caught in vicious cycle of novelty and boredom that

reinforces cynicism, emotional distances, devaluation, and neurasthenia or what William James called *Americanitis* (See Richardson, 2007).

Against the exhaustion of neurasthenia, in Simmel (1904 / 1997) consumerism becomes about the endless search for stimulation, difference, and escape from the crushing sameness of quantitative objective culture, even though the furious pursuit of the new is precisely what causes the burn out of quality into quantity in the first place. This is the case because the endless search for newness, which is precisely what led Baudelaire to the name 'modern', paradoxically ends up burying the new under an avalanche of weak novelty that seems like more of the same. Recognising this problem Fitzi (2018) raises a key point, which is much less prominent in many other studies of Simmel's work, which is that the endless collapse of individual difference into mass indifference in a social system where differentiation relies on lifestyle and consumption, causes tension, conflict, and a form of negative relationality founded upon distance (on this idea also see Cooper, 2010).

Akin to Pyyhtinen's (2009, 2018) insight about what we might call 'relational loneliness' in Simmel's work, Fitzi's point here is that it would be a mistake to read increases in social tension and conflict in terms of the breakdown of relations, because interactions based upon negativity, distance, and competition remain absolutely reliant on a sense of a relation between self and other and a 'sociological third' that defines the parameters of their conflict. In this respect, Fitzi (2018) explains that Simmel is the founder of conflict sociology, where conflict refers to strained individual interactions, rather than the kind of large scale historical struggles found in Marx. Although Fitzi fails to point out that this type of conflictual relationality

can translate into a meaningful cultural form to situate the individual in the world, which is precisely what we find in contemporary society where leftist and rightist movements of all kinds seek to oppose and overturn the cultural nihilism of late capitalism where everything comes down to the balance sheet and bottom line, he uses this to introduce his key focus: Simmel's individual ethics. While Pyyhtinen (2018) tends to overlook Simmel's focus on the construction of the individual in favour of a concern with the potential of relationality shot through with strangeness, Fitzi makes the problem of self-making central to this book, explaining that the work of the self boils down to finding some reason for living in a world that seems objectively meaningless. In this context Fitzi points to Simmel's work on religion (1902 / 1997; also see Simmel, 2013) and art (see his *Rembrandt*, 1916 / 2005), and shows that the work of these cultural forms involves providing a backdrop for the creation of coherent individualism and making sense of the fragmentation, complexity, and objectivity of the modern. Thus Fitzi's (2018) key point is that Simmel's thought centres upon responding to the challenge of modernity, which is essentially concerned with the reification of social relations in monolithic social forms that appear resistant to human meaning-making and identification.

In the teeth of this nightmarish situation that transforms humans into so many objects within a system that cannot see beyond objectivity, Fitzi's (2018) later Simmel (1918 / 2015) is focused on working out individual ethics, strategies for self-making, and reasons for living that deepen understandings of self-worth in the modern money economy where we tend to think about the value of the human in terms of the reductive question, 'how much?'

While Pyyhtinen (2018) tends to focus on the role ‘the third’ in Simmel’s work, suggesting that the key principle of his sociology is strangeness, Fitzi emphasises the problem of objectivity and the struggle for self-making in a world that endlessly empties the self into profane objectivity. In this way I think Fitzi’s Simmel identifies a key problem of the contemporary moment, which concerns the sense in which monolithic social forms (globalisation, the anthropocene) leave the individual feeling helpless, hopeless, and unable to transform their social world, and the consequent challenge of the (post-)modern, which resides in constructing forms of individuality robust enough to think positively about potential change in the face of a (globalised) system that is, on the one hand, totally human (the anthropocene), but on the other hand, entirely post-human and alien to subjective concerns about existence and life itself, which, of course, reside on the other side of basic economic calculations. However, the issue with this focus on the individual and the attempt to assert individualism in the face of a monolithic system that seems hardened to the needs of the self is that it tends to preclude the possibility of *social* change and in this way may reflect the problem of late capitalism, where the key conflict centres upon the struggle for individual difference in a world marked by economic indifference.

In this respect Tom Kemple (2018) extends Fitzi’s (2018) concern with the challenge of modernity and individualism by reading Simmel in terms of a sociological ethics of what we might call ‘humanised form’ that avoids the extremes of narcissism and reification. Thus the real value of Kemple’s work is founded in the way that he focuses upon Simmel’s attempt to overcome the separation of modern objective and subjective culture and in a sense develops a reading of Simmel’s ‘religiosity’ (1902 / 1997; 2013) or even mysticism of wholeness, where self and society come together

in a comprehensive unitary form (see Vandenberghe, 2010). Here, Kemple's work focuses on emphasising Simmel's social, rather than individual, ethics and contrasts Pyyhtinen's (2018) view that there is nothing beyond Simmel's strangeness by suggesting that his stark opposition between subjective and objective culture necessarily conjures a utopian vision of a comprehensive culture able to balance experience and form without lapsing into either absolute flux or inflexible structure. By focusing on Simmel's interpretations of the built environment, and particularly the ideas of the door and the bridge (also see Kemple, 2007 on this point), the central point of Kemple's interpretation of Simmel is, therefore, to explore how he moves from an exploration of individual life to an understanding of social totality and then centrally a consideration of how this totality might be made more humane. In this respect, Kemple's (2018) work also contrasts with Fitzi's (2018) study, which tends to prioritise individualism and present Simmel as a kind of proto-existentialist. Where Fitzi's main concern is Simmel's focus on the self and the survival of the individual in a world of objects, Kemple seeks to situate the individual in some kind of social totality in the name of overcoming the opposition between the experience of the lonely, self-enclosed self and the idea of reified social form impervious to human interests.

In order to situate the self in society and suggest ways to start to overcome the opposition between subjective and objective culture, Kemple (2018) sets out what he calls Simmel's 'geometry of social relations'. Through this idea Kemple seeks to map Simmel's spatial sociology by sketching horizontal (relational), diagonal (typification and strangeness, where the individual is in / out of society), and vertical (vocation and the link between individual and society) lines that come together to create the

image of a door that represents the possibility of a passage from a world marked by the alienation of self from society to a new social form that balances subjective and objective culture and recognises experience in a new comprehensive, unitary, and most importantly humane society. Although Kemple is not explicit about the methodological value of Simmel's architectural metaphors - the door that represents the liminality of relationality and the bridge that suggests the possibility of moving between states of sociability – I take it that the purpose of these images is to show that it is possible to subject the endless flux and transformations of modernity to some kind of mapping procedure in order to make sense and imagine a future where society is more than an imaginary monolith that towers over humans who cower before its structures. The irony of this procedure is, of course, that it was precisely these kind of efforts to capture the dynamism of modernity in formal structures that, in Simmel's view, eventually led to the emergence of the in- / post-human systems that started to undermine subjective culture in the first place. In light of this paradox, Kemple's (2018) challenge is to theorise the creation of forms that hold onto quality and human value, rather than abandon these to quantity, number, and objectivity, and imagine a form of relationality that remains on a human scale. I think that he manages to achieve this and find the possibility of humanised social form in his theological reading of Simmel's work that imagines the possibility of a negative religion without God (Vandenberghe, 2010).

Seeking a strange third way somewhere between paranoid individualism and monolithic social form, Kemple (2018) turns to Simmel's work on money and shows how the economy has essentially replaced religion as the modern God (also see Blumenberg, 2012, on this point concerning the relationship between money and

life). In Heideggerian (1977) language, we might say that the idea of the money economy has become a completely realised worldview, 'a world picture' based upon a modern ontotheological system of thought, meaning that money simultaneously participates in social life on the most essential level (ontology) and stands above the world as a kind of ultimate organising principle (theology). In order to demonstrate this point Kemple refers to the idea of the coin toss. Although we might imagine that the coin toss represents the ultimate expression of contingency (surely the stock market shows that money *is* modern chance, contingency, movement?), Kemple shows that the very use of the monetary medium to capture the expression of the state of fundamental uncertainty, which we might think is written into existence itself (think Andre Breton's surrealist idea of chance from *Nadja* (1999)), essentially cancels possibility by placing it under the rule of (a) state sovereignty (which guarantees the value of the coin) and perhaps more importantly (b) the regime of meaningless objective exchange, where the arbitrary decision between heads or tails effectively mirrors the purely quantitative distinction between more or less value, devoid of external support, reference, or significance (quality).

In this respect what we might take for an ontology of chance and contingency is seriously restricted by the parameters of the money economy, objectivity, and meaninglessness which, for example, precludes the type of interpretations the surrealists sought to develop in the 1920s and 1930s, where chance opens up new worlds and new ways of understanding. Thus the problem of modernity in Kemple's (2018) reading of Simmel resides in finding some way to step outside of the ontotheological system of money and objectivity in the name of a different world centred upon respect for subjectivity, experience, significance, and meaningful

human life. Although Kemple does not set out a comprehensive theory for shifting between these two worlds (objective and subjective) and passing through the door or over bridge to utopia, his focus on relationality and reference to Simmel's influence on Martin Buber (1986) who famously contrasted the objective world of 'I-It' connections to the truly social world of 'I-Thou' relations, suggests that the route towards a Simmelian utopia resides in a new kind of humanism and religion of compassion for the other based upon 'our' universal vulnerability and need to lean on social relations to live (see Simmel, 2013, also Vandenberghe, 2010).

Expanding upon the points made about the relationality of loneliness and conflict in Simmel's work by Pyyhtinen and Fitzi, Kemple's (2018) basic point is that humans are never outside of social relations, even though this is precisely what the hypertrophy of the objective money economy might lead them to imagine. The reason for this is that the monetary universe's emphasis on the bare object and base objectivity tends to provoke a defensive reaction from the individual who seeks to resist objectification in such a way that obscures the essential sociability of the human whose humanness rests very precisely on the way 'they' make worlds with others in cooperation and conflict. What is lost, therefore, in the strained opposition between post-human social form (the hypertrophy of the system) and the desperate individual determined to separate themselves from a system set on their objectification (the atrophy of the individual) is the essential sociability of the human, which is precisely what Kemple looks to rescue by foregrounding Simmel's sociological / theological ethics (see Simmel's work on religion, 1902 / 1997; 2013). Although the religiosity of this ethical turn is not really made explicit in Kemple's book, in my reading what he proposes is the replacement of Mammon, Thomas

Carlyle's God of money (McCarraher, 2019), with the basic principle of com-passion founded in Simmel's key idea of the relation, and the elevation of this notion to the level of a Platonic idea or utopian concept. But how would this transition happen? In terms of bridging these two worlds, we might refer to Nigel Dodd's (2012) work on Simmel's utopian idea of money, which is essentially concerned with shifting the principle of difference from money (more or less) to the individual (who is rendered entirely indifferent in the money society) in order to create a society that, to coin a contemporary phrase, puts 'people before profit'. The value of introducing this theory into Kemple's proposal for emphasising Simmel's social ethics is that it offers a way to shift from objective to subjective culture *within* the money economy itself and consequently open up a space for the kind of com-passionate social form that Kemple suggests, with the qualification that it would also be a good idea to repurpose the Hebrew's prohibition on graven images in order to prevent the ideal of religious com-passion finding form in some profane representational object or other that ends up devaluing humanity over again.

Although Kemple (2018) does not situate his reading of Simmel in the context of contemporary social concerns, there is no doubt that his opposition of a *potential* utopian social form based upon human com-passion and soulfulness (see Harrington and Kemple, 2012; Mannheim, 2012) and an *actual* reified, objective, post-human monetary system where the only question is 'how much?', speaks to current issues relating to the violence of late capitalism, humanism / non-humanism, the relationship between humanity and the environment, and the problem of the anthropocene. While it might initially appear that Kemple's interpretation of Simmel is out of time in terms of its focus upon the plight of the human (surely, we are all post-

or non-human now?), I would argue that the kind of humanism he outlines through his reading of Simmel's sociology of relationality is characterised less by the Prometheanism and scientism that has led to the radical alienation of humanity from nature, the emergence of the anthropocene, and related ecological catastrophism we live with today, and more by a religious vision of the human that emphasises vulnerability, dependence, and humility before others, whether these others are human or non-human forms of life. Against the humanism of the Promethean and liberal traditions, which valorises the human and considers everything in the world ripe for 'his' colonisation, I think the humanism of Kemple's Simmel is on the side of the later Heidegger (1977), who was critical of technology, techno-science, and the transformation of the natural world into a thing or standing reserve to be used and abused in the name of progress. In line with Heidegger's concern with 'letting be' or 'restraining the will' (see Bret Davis, 2006, on Heidegger's idea of the will), I would make the case that the humanism of Kemple's Simmel is a humanism of limits, smallness, and immersion in the whole, where the idea of 'the whole' may be understood in a variety of ways including those involving theories of religious communities or ecological systems. Building upon this idea, in the final, concluding section of the article I want to tease out the ecological ethics of Kemple's (non)humanistic Simmel through reference to David Beer's (2019) recent work on the late Simmel in order to suggest that the key contemporary value of reading Simmel today resides in a recognition of what we might call his non-human humanism.

IV

Simmel's (Non)Humanism

Read in terms of the coordinates of Chernilo's (2017) debate about the nature of the human, we might conclude that if Kemple's (2018) Simmel is more Heideggerian in the sense that his concern is with a soulful humanism of relationality and being-in-the-world, Fitzi's (2018) Simmel might be more Sartrean in respect of his focus upon the individual's profound alienation from society and need to develop a project for life. However, following Pyyhtinen (2018) we know that the classic Simmelian move is to focus on the 'third', which would involve looking to the contrast inside this (oppositional) relation and emphasising the strangeness or critical tension within the duality of positions (in this case Fitzi / Kemple). Now I think that this tension is precisely what we encounter when we read Beer's (2019) work on Simmel's final books. Somewhere between my readings of Fitzi and Kemple, I want to make the case that Beer's work represents a kind of 'strange third' marked by tension precisely because it considers Simmel's final books – his *Rembrandt* (1916 / 2005) and *The View of Life* (1918 / 2015) – in their proper historical context (1914-1918) scarred by apocalyptic endings / beginnings / and possible futures. For Beer, we cannot overlook this context when reading Simmel's final works because in a sense these books are marked by his experience of this period of historical and personal crisis, or, we might say using religious language, apocalypse that in many respects might be seen to reflect the radical division between (a) the progress of a Promethean society where technological objectivity produces the kind of existential reaction that would later inform Sartrean (1947 / 2007) thought (Fitzi's reading of Simmel's

individualism) and (b) a completely different vision of life where relationality is everything and what techno-science misses in its obsessive focus on the object is the ontological truth of participation, implication, and responsibility hardwired into existence (Kemple's reading on Simmel's religiosity).

In my view the true novelty of Beer's (2019) reading of Simmel's final works resides in his identification of the way in which these books speak to the moment of historical and personal crisis marked by World War I and Simmel's own impending death and the sense in which these moments of crisis mirror our own historical predicament characterised by looming ecological catastrophe, extinction, and what Zizek (2010) writes about in terms of 'the end times'. It is clear that Kemple's book similarly speaks to contemporary concerns, in respect of the way he reads Simmel's ethical thought in terms of an apocalyptic choice between the nightmare of the objective money economy and the possibility of religious society of relationality inspired by vulnerability, com-*passion*, and soulfulness, but what Beer (2019) brings to the table is a focus on the implication of these very human concerns within non-human processes centred upon life, existence, death, and the work of extinction. In this respect the key contribution of Beer's reading of Simmel's final works written between 1914-1918 is to show that it was in this period that Simmel transformed his sociology of the relation and its organisation in social structures into a full blown philosophy of the dynamism of life and temporary formation inspired by the *lebensphilosophie* of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Bergson (also see Pyyhtinen (2012) in this regard).

In this reading of Simmel's work the impact of profound historical and personal crisis led him to project his sociology of mobile relations and temporary formation into a philosophy of life and death, where the end represents a kind of limit that enables organisms to construct meaningful forms that reflect a sense of the infinite value of life itself. According to Beer, this is how we should read Simmel's *Rembrandt* (1916 / 2005), which focuses on the way art can impose form upon the endless flows of life and in this respect make sense of what might appear otherwise senseless. Expanding upon this idea, Beer explains that Simmel see Rembrandt's work in terms of (a) the formal convergence of past events in the present, (b) the ways in which objective processes impact upon subjective life, (c) movement finds stability in form, and finally (d) life runs up against the limits of death. Thus Simmel reads Rembrandt's paintings, such as *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*, as synecdoches capable of revealing the tensions between life and form and movement and stability that his early work interprets on a purely sociological level, but he now imagines are representative of ontological processes founded in the nature of existence itself (Gross, 2001).

Following Simmel's own death of liver cancer in 1918, the Futurists would, of course, make use of art to represent modern mobility and endless change, but there is, I think, a significant difference between what Marinetti and others (for example, Umberto Boccioni) wanted to represent and what Simmel saw in Rembrandt's works of the 17th century. Where the Futurists celebrated the movement, speed, and in a sense the anonymous flows of life that symbolise the death of every form, organism, and structure, Simmel's Rembrandt is more about recognising the limit of death in order to reflect upon the fragile beauty and limitless value of life in temporary form

capable of inspiring the creation of human meaning and significance beyond the violence of life in itself. In respect of their love for the violence of life stripped bare, the Futurists would more likely identify with the anonymous flows of Simmel's money economy where meaning disappears before bare objectivity, while the conclusion Simmel himself reaches in Rembrandt is that life only takes on value inside the formal structures that make it matter precisely because they have and are made by their limits. This is, in his language, the true significance of 'the metaphysics of death' (see Simmel, 1910 / 2007). As Simmel (1918 / 2015: 69) explains in his final work, 'death...appears as the shaper of life'.

This understanding of the value of death is, of course, a lesson we can also learn from Borges' (2000) short story *The Immortal* where Borges imagines what endless life would look like. While we might imagine immortal creatures displaying the highest levels of intellectual and cultural development and so on, Borges reveals of truth of endless life in the slovenly immortals who have degenerated to the level of the lowest beasts, precisely because they have no limits, no future, no reason to do anything. The key point of this example is, therefore, that life takes on meaning only when we become aware of the 'border of death' and we can only think significant thoughts on the basis of our ignorance of what lay on the other side. Following Heidegger (2010) who saw that authenticity relied on what he called being-towards-death, Simmel (1918 / 2015) was led to the conclusion that life matters most when it teeters on the brink, when it runs up against the edge of death, and we face looming catastrophe and potential apocalypse (World War I and his own failing health), where the Greek word 'apocalypsis' means 'revealing' or 'uncovering'. Thus the borderline (See Simmel, 1908 / 2007), the dividing line between two states, is key in Simmel's

final works. Indeed, Beer (2019) very skilfully explains this over the course of his book and in particular when he reflects upon Simmel's concept of 'world', which refers to the symbolic forms we live through in the name of making sense.

Given this reading of Simmel's final works, we might conclude that the key problem of the present is founded in the violence of late capitalist global economy, which has colonised life itself and subjected every meaningful form to the necessity to move for the sake of circulation and what Simmel (1918 / 2015) calls 'more life'. What should be clear, however, from the above is that in the Simmelian universe the issue with the wholesale identification with life and 'more life' is that it also represents the death of 'more than life', the death of form, the death of significance, and in a sense the death of death itself. Although we might imagine that the effort to eliminate death represents a positive move, Beer (2019) explains that the hypertrophy of life and the atrophy of form reflects the way in which the human world 'wounds' and destroys itself to free anonymous post-human flows. Against the endless transformations of life in itself (endless circulation, metabolism), Beer's 'late Simmel' looks to embrace the limit of death in order to impose some meaningful form upon 'the quantitative vastness of existence'. In this way Beer shows how Simmel suggests the construction of worlds able to make life matter and provides his reader with a model of read Simmel into the non-humanism of the contemporary moment. Reflecting upon the excessive nature of communication in the hyper-connected, hyper-related society, Beer (2019) notes that we need to find ways to make sense and build worlds. However what he does not do is extend this theory of the need for what we might call worlding to an exploration of the violence of the global money economy and the politics of post- / non- / more-than- / humanism.

In my view the problem of the politics of post- / non- / more-than / humanism is the key to understanding the relevance of Simmel's work today. As we have seen above, the central issue of the global money economy, particularly under the political ideology of neoliberalism where everything is understood in economic terms (See Davies (2014) on this point), is that the identification with anonymous flows destroys any understanding of limits and endings that might enable the formation of a meaningful world able to shape the future. Even though it might be the case that this situation sprang from the philosophy of humanism, a humanism of the Godlike nature of the human vis-à-vis the rest of existence that becomes a Heideggerian (1977) 'standing reserve', the truth is that it has now transgressed itself in the emergence of a violent technological post-humanism that identifies with the anonymous flows of life beyond the formal limits of anything we might call 'human'. This violent transformation of humanism into post-humanism is, of course, behind the economic ideas of endless growth, endless work, and endless profit founded upon a liberal, capitalist fantasy that flows of life are in themselves infinite, limitless, and endlessly open for exploitation, monetisation, and capitalisation. Despite the apocalypticism of Swedish Teenagers, School strikes, and social movements (Extinction Rebellion), this vision of limitlessness persists in the institutions of late capitalism.

Against this vision of what we might call post-human humanism characterised by a valorisation of (a) the money economy, (b) biological process, (c) the anonymous flows of life, (d) the death of form, and finally (e) the death of death itself, what I think we should take from Kemple's (2018) 'theological Simmel' and Beer's (2019) 'catastrophic Simmel' is a theory of the value of a different kind of humanism,

perhaps a non-human humanism, organised around a recognition that there is nothing special about human beings in the scheme of life in itself, that we are limited, vulnerable, and only survive on the basis of our necessary immersion in an socio-eco-system defined by relationality and openness to other forms of life (where is it important to emphasise the idea of a *form* of life) (Gross, 2001). Ultimately, what I take from my readings of Simmel and his contemporary commentators (and I am particularly inspired by Pyyhtinen and his use of Deleuze and Guattari at this point) is that it is possible to read a *major Simmel* into future as a theorist of infinite relationality, and say that this makes him important for understanding our place in a globalised world, but that it is also *necessary* to consider the *minor Simmel* of the necessity of limits, because it is only by recognising limits that we might create space to build meaningful worlds able to shape the future. In this respect I think we should supplement the more traditional understandings of Simmel (the *major Simmel*, the modern theorist of relationality and the infinite movement of life) with a theory of a *minor Simmel* as a post-modern theorist of death and, where the present is concerned, extinction. Exploring Simmel through his 'limit-thinking' might shed light on the humility and com-passion embedded in what I want to call his humble non-human humanism and reveal the value of reading and re-reading his work for the present scarred by looming catastrophe and the future that seems increasingly difficult to shape.

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