

## GEORG SIMMEL

### A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH



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Georg Simmel was born in the heart of Berlin on March 1, 1858. He studied a wide range of subjects at the University of Berlin. However, his first effort to produce a dissertation was rejected, and one of his professors remarked, "We would do him a great service if we do not encourage him further in this direction" (Frisby, 1984:23). Despite this, Simmel persevered and received his doctorate in philosophy in 1881. He remained at the university in a teaching capacity until 1914, although he occupied a relatively unimportant position as *Privatdozent* from 1885 to 1900. In the latter position, Simmel served as an unpaid lecturer whose livelihood was dependent on student fees. Despite his marginality, Simmel did rather well in this position, largely because he was an excellent lecturer and attracted large numbers of (paying) students (Frisby, 1981:17; Salomon,

[1963] 1997). His style was so popular that even cultured members of Berlin society were drawn to his lectures, which became public events (Leck, 2000).

Simmel's marginality is paralleled by the fact that he was a somewhat contradictory and therefore bewildering person:

If we put together the testimonials left by relatives, friends, students, contemporaries, we find a number of sometimes contradictory indications concerning Georg Simmel. He is depicted by some as being tall and slender, by others as being short and as bearing a forlorn expression. His appearance is reported to be unattractive, typically Jewish, but also intensely intellectual and noble. He is reported to be hard-working, but also humorous and overarticulate as a lecturer. Finally we hear that he was intellectually brilliant [Lukács, 1991:145], friendly, well-disposed—but also that *inside* he was irrational, opaque, and wild.

(Schnabel, cited in Poggi, 1993:55)

Simmel wrote innumerable articles ("The Metropolis and Mental Life") and books (*The Philosophy of Money*). He was well known and influential in German academic circles. His Berlin home was a center of cultural life where he and his wife, Gertrud, hosted important figures including poets Rainer Rilke and Stefan George, philosophers Edmund Husserl and Heinrich Rickert, and sociologists Max and Marianne Weber (Helle, 2013). Hans Georg Gadamer noted that Simmel's essays on metaphysics influenced philosopher Martin Heidegger's ([1953] 2010) monumental book, *Being and Time*. Simmel even had an international following, especially in the United States, where his work was of great significance in the birth of sociology. Finally, in 1900, Simmel received official recognition, a purely honorary title at the University of Berlin, which did not give him full academic status. Simmel tried to obtain many academic positions, but he failed in spite of the support of such scholars as Max Weber.

Despite the fact that he was a baptized Protestant, one of the reasons for Simmel's failure was that he was a Jew in a 19th-century Germany rife with anti-Semitism (Birnbbaum, 2008; Kasler, 1985). Thus, in a report on Simmel written to a minister of education, Simmel was