

# Simmel's Epistemic Road to Multidimensionality

NADER SAIEDI\*  
*Carleton College*

Simmel's critique of historical realism constitutes the foundation of his sociological theories. Confronting the crisis of European thought at the turn of the century, Simmel extends the Kantian critique to the realm of history and society, and advocates a sociological relativism that rejects both historical materialism and historical idealism. Consequently, he arrives at a multidimensional theory of action and rationality through his epistemological critique of historical realism. This epistemological construction of multidimensionality differentiates Simmel from the functionalist attempt to base multidimensionality on the analysis of the problem of order. Advocating an epistemological definition of unity and reality, and rejecting the theory of historical empiricism, Simmel radically negates the possibility of structural-historical laws and construction of any universal history.

A fundamental presuppositional category of sociological theory is the question of rationality. As the heir of Enlightenment and romanticism, modern sociological theory continues to reinterpret and reconstruct different dimensions of the theory of rationality.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to the functionalist and neofunctionalist attempts to reduce the problem of rationality to the ontological category of the orientation of action, both the Enlightenment-romanticist debate and modern sociological theory have addressed a complex of ontological, epistemological, and critical dimensions of the concept of rationality. At an ontological level, the theory of rationality, as seen by Comte,<sup>2</sup> Mill,<sup>3</sup> and Parsons,<sup>4</sup> is concerned with the question whether human behavior is primarily caused by rational or nonrational considerations. When conceived in its aggregate and collective form the issue turns into a debate between historical materialism and historical idealism. In other words, the ontological dimension of rationality is ultimately analyzed in the

---

\*Direct all correspondence to: Nader Saiedi, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton College, Northfield Minnesota 55057.

context of the problem of order.<sup>5</sup> A multidimensional theory of social action emphasizes the causal interaction of both material and ideal institutions and finds both rationalistic and nonrationalistic theories incapable of reconciling the problem of order with the idea of freedom.<sup>6</sup> However, an epistemological approach to the problem of rationality is concerned with the subject-object relationship and investigates the limits of reason in general, and sociological reason in particular. The major question asked here is whether or not sociohistorical knowledge can penetrate the essence of sociohistorical reality and represent the social world in its concrete totality. This approach was dominant in the German neo-Kantian, hermeneutical, and historicist theories of society. Finally, the critical dimension of the theory of rationality is concerned with the possibility of practical rationality, objective value judgments, and the nature of rational political arrangement. Marxism and critical theory explicitly address this aspect of the theory of rationality.

Georg Simmel's social theory offers a novel and creative approach to the problem of rationality. Simmel's sociology provides a multidimensional theory of social action that insists on the significance of both material and ideal factors in the determination of sociohistorical reality. What is unique in Simmel, however, is that his multidimensional approach is not primarily based on an analysis of the Hobbesian problem of order. Instead, his multidimensional ontological theory of rationality is founded on his epistemological approach to the problem of rationality. In fact, Simmel rejects both historical materialism and historical idealism on the basis of his critique of the theory of historical realism. This article is an introductory attempt to investigate the nature and the significance of Simmel's epistemological relativism, arguing that Simmel's ontology is based on his epistemological premises. This implies that Simmel's sociological propositions are directly informed by his epistemological assumptions. Moreover, Simmel's ontology and epistemology are formulated as a radical critique of the dominant grand theoretical systems of nineteenth-century social theory. Finally, it is the transitional crisis of social theory at the turn of the twentieth century that led to the concern with epistemology and the Kantian question. This article examines Simmel's epistemology and the epistemological basis of his ontological positions with regard to the questions of action theory, sociological realism-nominalism, and historical laws-universal history.

### **SIMMEL'S EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE CRISIS OF EUROPEAN THOUGHT**

Simmel's theories developed at the end of the nineteenth century and in the early decades of the twentieth century. This period was characterized by the emergence of extremely significant and productive theoretical formulations in Germany. It is a period that extends from Nietzsche's life philosophy to Dilthey's hermeneutics and Husserl's phenomenology, and culminates in Simmel's and Weber's social theories. Furthermore, this is a transitional period in the Western perception and definition of individual and society. The transition is so fundamental that it takes the form of a crisis—the crisis of European thought. Nietzsche talks about nihilism, Husserl writes about the crisis of European man and European knowledge, Dilthey advocates a hermeneutical circle, and both Simmel and Weber revolt against the dogmatism and reductionism of nineteenth-century grand theoretical systems. Simmel's response to this crisis is reflected in his sociological relativism. At the ontological level Simmel rejects nineteenth-century con-

structions of universal history, evolutionary theories, iron laws of history, reduction of the individual to society and history, and various forms of unidimensional action theory. Simmel's skepticism, however, does not stop on the ontological level. In fact, he extends skepticism to the level of the possibility of reason and sociological knowledge. The decline of nineteenth-century dogmatic and deterministic systems led Simmel to a radical analysis of the Kantian question. That is why epistemology becomes the central theoretical question in Simmel's writings. Arriving at a relativistic and skepticist epistemology, Simmel constructs a multidimensional, perspectivist, and relativistic ontology.

Although influenced by Spinoza, Hegel, Rickert, Husserl, and Dilthey, it is Kant's transcendental idealism that provides the fundamental premises of Simmelian problematics. Kant's theory was a major assault upon the empirical theory of knowledge. According to empiricism, the mind plays a mere passive role in the process of the attainment of knowledge. Consequently, knowledge is supposed to be an exact copy or representation of external, objective reality. Although empirical theory may lead to idealism (Berkeley) and skepticism (Hume), it is reasonable to suggest that empiricism advocates the analytical atomistic approach, the correspondence theory of truth, and an exclusive dogmatism. Because knowledge is the sum product of simple impressions—to use Hume's terms—understanding a complex phenomenon is identical to analyzing and understanding its simple constitutive elements.<sup>7</sup> The meaning of a proposition, for example, is to be known by understanding the meaning of all its constitutive simple words. For empiricism, knowledge reflects and represents the external reality. Therefore, the criterion of truth is to be identified as the correspondence of ideas with the external reality. Finally, because knowledge is a passive reflection of the reality, there can exist only one real and true world, whereas any other "world" should be considered as false and illusive.<sup>8</sup>

Kantian theory, on the other hand, emphasized the generative, active, and creative role of the mind in the formation of knowledge and understanding. Attempting a reconciliation between empiricism and rationalism, Kant investigated conditions of the possibility of human knowledge. Accordingly, Kant distinguished between the a priori forms and the empirical contents of human knowledge or reality. Transcendental forms and categories, however, cannot provide us with any sensation or conception independent of the empirical contents of sense experience. Therefore, although there exists no innate idea, the fundamental forms, elements, and conditions of the objectivity of human knowledge are not produced by experience. Consequently, the forms and structure of knowledge cannot be reduced to their contents, nor can truth and objectivity be identified with a correspondence of knowledge and external reality. On the contrary, truth and objectivity become meaningful within formal and categorical structure of mind, without which no experience is possible. Manifold chaotic perceptions, Kant argues, can be transformed into orderly and harmonious knowledge by the synthetic activity of the mind whose own unity of apperception provides the perceived world with a synthetic order and unity. For Kant, however, forms of experience are assumed to be universal and constant. Thus, he shares the empiricist assumption of the validity of only one real world.<sup>9</sup>

Kantian theory could not explain the source of mental forms and categories. Simmel, however, tried to locate the origin of categories in various interests of life.<sup>10</sup> It is important to remember that for Simmel no form or categorical framework can exhaust the totality of reality or human experience. Different forms give rise to different worlds and

different types of knowledge. These forms are basically not comparable to one another and therefore their corresponding worlds are held to be equally valid. The truth and objectivity of any part of any distinct world should be defined internally and in terms of the formal condition of the possibility of that particular world.<sup>11</sup> As Simmel acknowledges,<sup>12</sup> this aspect of his theory is heavily influenced by Spinoza's philosophy in which matter and mind are two distinct, valid, and incomparable forms and orders of the same ontological reality.<sup>13</sup> Simmel systematically insists that the same empirical content can be conceived within alternative formal structures, giving rise to distinct types of worlds.<sup>14</sup> In short, Simmel's epistemic idealism tries to extend Kant's critique of nature to the realm of sociocultural reality. He writes:

It is necessary to emancipate the self from historicism in the same way that Kant freed it from naturalism. Perhaps the same epistemological critique will succeed here too: namely to establish that the sovereign intellect also forms the construct of mental existence which we call history only by means of its own special categories. Man as an object of knowledge is a product of nature and history. But man as a knowing subject produces both nature and history.<sup>15</sup>

Simmel's relativistic epistemology is the foundation of his ontological propositions. As Simmel points out,<sup>16</sup> in every important cultural epoch one can perceive a central idea, a fundamental category, toward which theoretical interpretation and practical interests are oriented. In fact, that central idea is supposed to be both the ultimate explanation of reality and the highest ethical idea of social life. According to Simmel, for Greek classicism it was the ideal of being, for the Christian Middle Ages it was the concept of God, for the eighteenth century it was the idea of nature, and for the nineteenth century it was the ideas of society and history.<sup>17</sup> More specifically, nineteenth-century thought reduced the complexity of human life to the unitary and structural causation of a few universal historical laws. Examples of these historical, sociological laws emphasized by Simmel are Comte's laws of three stages, Marxian historical materialism, Spencer's laws of differentiation and integration, and various cyclical theories of historical development.<sup>18</sup> According to Simmel, however, all these theories suffer theoretical reification and reductionism.

First, all these theories mistake their abstract models of social action with concrete reality, and, therefore, arrive at a unidimensional action theory that is either materialistic or idealistic. Simmel's epistemology leads to a multidimensional theory of action in his sociology. Second, all these theories commit an epistemological mistake of confusing their heuristic unit of analysis with a supposedly exclusive unit of reality. Their reduction of reality and objectivity to societal-historical totality is as wrong as the reduction of reality to the atomistic level of individual psychology. As an alternative to both individualistic and structuralist problematics, Simmel emphasizes the reality of both individual and society, and insists on the theoretical significance of interaction and sociation in sociohistorical analysis. This means that the refutation of historical realism requires an epistemological critique of the notions of unity, reality, and objectivity.

The third fundamental mistake of the sweeping historical laws is their empirical, naturalistic, and realistic theory of knowledge according to which knowledge, including historical knowledge, is a reproduction of the concrete reality. Rejecting the empiricist model, Simmel emphasizes the productive, and not the reproductive, character of historical knowledge according to which any universal history is a one-sided construction of

historical data into a synthetic unity based on a particular theoretical and extra-theoretical interest and valuation. Consequently, Simmel's epistemology leads to a reformulation of the notions of history and historical knowledge. The remainder of this article will examine Simmel's multidimensional action theory, his critique of sociological realism and nominalism, and his refutation of historical empiricism.

## THE STRUCTURE OF SIMMEL'S SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

As pointed out before, Simmel believes in a multidimensional theory of social action. According to Simmel, various reductionist theories of history are the products of a fundamental epistemological confusion: They mistake the heuristic category for the concrete reality and assume that this theoretical model reproduces reality in its concrete complexity. Both historical idealism and historical materialism suffer such an epistemological error. Sociohistorical reality is a complex of infinitely interlocking elements that cannot be captured in any single theoretical framework. Consequently any attempt to formulate a general history, a law of historical development, a continuous totality is necessarily based on an act of abstraction that selectively rearranges some discrete phenomena out of which it creates a continuous theoretical synthesis. Such a synthesis is based on a particular form, and particular extra-theoretical interests.

The organic relation between epistemological relativism and sociological interactionism is so essential to Simmel's thought that it is frequently repeated in both his early and later writings. In *The Problem of the Philosophy of History* Simmel writes:

We see history as an interwoven fabric in which, qualitatively different kinds of event-sequences are interconnected. Given this picture of history, we must admit that historical materialism has achieved a hitherto unattained synthesis of the totality of historical data. In a reduction of extraordinary simplicity, the whole of history is tuned to a single keynote. But consider the claim that historical materialism provides a naturalistic reproduction of reality. This is a methodological error of the first class. It confuses the conceptual construct of the event—a product of our theoretical interests—with the immediacy of the actual, empirical occurrence of the event itself.<sup>19</sup>

Challenging the reductionism of both historical idealism and materialism, Simmel argues that every historical moment could function with equal legitimacy as the ultimate epistemic basis for a complete or universal history.<sup>20</sup> This is so because it is impossible to gain a perspicuous view of the reciprocal causal relations of all historical factors; however, this reciprocal causal nexus is the only genuinely unified entity in history.<sup>21</sup> In the same book Simmel insists that historical idealism is as reductionistic as historical materialism:

Actually, historical idealism is a form of epistemological realism. It does not conceive the science of history as a distinctive intellectual construct of reality determined by constitutive epistemic categories; on the contrary, it regards history as a reproduction of the event as it really happened. From the perspective of historical idealism, however, what is "real" is a metaphysical idea. . . . This form of idealism is actually a species of materialism.<sup>22</sup>

The same idea is the focal point of Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money*. From the epistemology of a relativistic worldview<sup>23</sup> Simmel concludes a multidimensional theory

of causation in social life. In fact, he chooses money as the object of his detailed investigation because for him money is the ultimate symbol of the pure interactive model of sociocultural life. He writes:

Methodologically, this basic intention can be expressed in the following manner. The attempt is made to construct a new story beneath historical materialism, such that explanatory value of the incorporation of economic life into the causes of intellectual culture is preserved, while these economic forms themselves are recognized as the result of more profound valuations and currents of psychological or even metaphysical pre-conditions. For the practice of cognition, this must develop in infinite reciprocity.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, in his demarcation of the field of sociology he emphasizes that both economic and cultural institutions are superstructural institutions both of which are different moments of the totality of social interactions.<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere, Simmel mentions the emergence of nation-states and the Reformation as causal factors parallel to the ascendance of the bourgeoisie in the modern society.<sup>26</sup> Simmel holds an epistemological notion of unity and reality. The debate concerning sociological realism and sociological nominalism has long been a major ontological issue with significant epistemological implications. Historically speaking, the Enlightenment tradition emphasized the idea of sociological nominalism, according to which it is only the individual who is real whereas society is only an abstraction and a fictitious entity. The epistemological and methodological consequences of this position were of far-reaching significance. Because social institutions were seen to be merely aggregates of individuals, it was necessary that they should be explained in terms of the laws of human nature and deduced from individual psychology. The social contract, furthermore, was considered to be the typical basis of social norms and institutions, and consequently alternative forms of rationalistic theories were advocated. The priority of individual reason over social tradition provided a dogmatic optimism concerning the capabilities of reason and theory to attain objective knowledge of reality. Individual behavior was assumed to be determined primarily by rational considerations and therefore the necessity of the rule of reason, as opposed to the dictates of tradition and religion, was strongly emphasized.<sup>27</sup>

The Romanticist reaction to Enlightenment, however, insisted on the theory of sociological realism, according to which society is an independent reality that cannot be reduced to the individual's psychology. For romanticism, society was not an aggregate of its individual members. Instead, society was to be identified as the pattern and the form of social relations, which were assumed to transcend the level of individuals and individual characteristics. The methodological and epistemological implications of romanticist organicism were the exact opposite of that of the Enlightenment. Individuals were considered to be embodiments of their social relations and embedded within the historicity of their cultural traditions. Accordingly, alternative versions of the rationalistic these were rejected and the nonrational and irrational aspects and determinants of human behavior were emphasized.<sup>28</sup>

Sociology as a synthesis of the traditions of Enlightenment and romanticism does not appear to have been very consistent in its stance toward the question of the ontological status of society. Marx, for example, was a serious advocate of sociological realism while at the same time he remained faithful to some rationalistic assumptions of the Enlight-

enment.<sup>29</sup> Weber, on the other hand, emphasized sociological nominalism while insisting on the nonrational and irrational aspects of individual behavior and social processes.<sup>30</sup> In general, however, sociological theory has taken three ideal typical alternative stances toward the ontological status of society. Structuralists insist on the reality of society.<sup>31</sup> Some phenomenological–hermeneutical theories, on the other hand, emphasize the reality of individuals and deny any ontological status for society.<sup>32</sup> For symbolic interactionists, however, the realm of interaction provides the real unit of sociological analysis while both society and individual subjectivity are assumed to be the products of symbolic interactions.<sup>33</sup>

Simmel's theory radically departs from all of these classic stances of sociological theory. His alternative is based on an entirely different logic and theoretical structure. Instead of assuming an ontological stance as to whether or not society is real, he embarks upon a critique of the meaning of the notions of "reality" and "unity." To claim an ontological stance for a society is to claim a unity for that society as a distinct entity from any other social and nonsocial phenomena. In other words, the reality of society requires the assumption of the existence of a nonconventional and real unity demarcated from its surrounding environment. One might think of the notion of "social system" with its boundaries, complexities, and interactions with its surroundings as a possible example of the Simmelian concept of unity and reality. Simmel, however, was not a system theorist and did not pursue this possibility. Instead, he continued to repeat his question: If reality is to be identified with unity, what is unity and what is an identical unit?

Simmel's answer to this question differentiates his theories from other theories of realism and nominalism because he finds unity to be an "epistemological" rather than an "ontological" question. Unity, he asserts, is not an objective phenomenon but a subjective concept and category. Simmel's conception of unity is similar to Kant's; for both, unity is assumed to be a mental category that is imposed by the synthetic unity of apperception upon the content and the matter of experience. Unity, in other words, is a transcendental concept that is not derived from experience but provides the condition for the possibility of experience itself. More specifically, unity is the product of the organizing and unifying function of the alternative forms in ordering the human experience of reality. But because no single form exists, but rather infinite possible forms and perspectives, unity becomes a relative and perspective-bound phenomenon. In other words, different levels of unity and reality are possible, depending on the subject's distance from the same empirical content. Simmel writes:

When we look at human life from a certain distance, we see each individual in his precise differentiation from all others. But if we increase our distance . . . there emerges, instead, the picture of a society . . . it is certainly no less justified than is the other in which the parts, the individuals, are seen in their differentiation . . . The difference between the two merely consists in the difference between purposes of cognition, and this difference, in turn, corresponds to a difference in distance.<sup>34</sup>

It is true, Simmel argues, that society is a composite entity, but this is not a sufficient ground for denying it a real status. The individual self, he maintains, is also a composite entity and each component is in turn divisible into lower-level constituents. Accordingly, the identification of unity and reality with nonreducibility destroys the possibility of unity in general.<sup>35</sup> This implies, however, that the notions of one and oneness are not

exclusively ontological and objective characteristics of entities. Unity is an epistemological concept that refers to the distance, the perspective, and the relational form of observation of reality. In this sense one can say that society and individual are both real and fictitious. Simmel insists that

simplicity and complexity, therefore, are relative concepts. They do not correspond to the distinction between reality itself and the derivative conceptual constructs of reality. On the contrary, they are both epistemological categories. . . . In a metaphysical sense, therefore both concepts are subjective, and in an epistemological sense both are objective.<sup>36</sup>

This epistemological notion of unity, however, has its ontological counterpart in reality. Unity is defined by Simmel as the reciprocity of the interrelation of the elements comprising a phenomenon.<sup>37</sup> Simmel's thought at this point is clearly dialectical and manifests the impact of some Hegelian ideas. For Hegel, identity is defined as the synthetic unity of the contradictory movements of the opposites. Because becoming and process are real and concrete, identity should be equated with interaction, history and totality. Thus Hegel believed that relations are prior to the solid and finite terms of the relation.<sup>38</sup> These Hegelian ideas are systematically present in Simmel's epistemological and sociological theories. Thus Simmel's analysis of any phenomenon emphasizes the contradictory aspects and dimensions of the issue without proposing an exclusive and one-dimensional answer to any question. For Simmel, everything is relational, mutual, and reciprocal. His emphasis on conflict and the reciprocity of domination<sup>39</sup> should not be considered exceptional or fragmentary explorations. In fact, this dialectical reciprocity of relations and oppositions underlies his entire notion of thinghood, objectivity, unity, and reality. But this definition of unity implies a specific stance toward the question of the proper unit of sociological analysis. Simmel's theory is similar to the later positions of symbolic interactionists, in that he insists upon sociation and interaction as the locus of sociological investigation.<sup>40</sup> In a fascinating passage, Simmel defines both the atomistic-analytical and the structural-synthetic approaches to the social reality as the retrospective products of mental interpretation and formal synthesis. He writes:

It is not true that the cognition of series of individual occurrences grasps immediate reality. This reality, rather, is given to us as a complex of images, as a surface of contiguous phenomena. We articulate this datum . . . into something like the destinies of individuals. Or we reduce its simple matter-of-factness to single elements. . . . Clearly, in either case there occurs a process which we inject into reality, an *ex post facto* intellectual transformation of the immediately given reality.<sup>41</sup>

This epistemological character of unity, reality, and objectivity implies that no universal history and its historical laws can reproduce the complexity of the concrete reality. This is elaborated in Simmel's critique of historical realism.

## REFUTATION OF HISTORICAL EMPIRICISM

In *The Problems of the Philosophy of History*, Simmel launches a frontal attack on historical realism or historical empiricism and advocates an epistemological idealism.



According to historical empiricism and realism: (a) history and historical knowledge comprise, ideally, all events that actually have occurred; and (b) history is a reproduction of reality.<sup>42</sup> For Simmel, the British empiricist philosophy, Ranke's historicism, Marxist historical materialism, and German historical idealism are among the classic instances of historical empiricism. Contrary to historical empiricism, Simmel advocates an "epistemic idealism" according to which (a) knowledge, including historical knowledge, can never be a direct representation of the external reality; (b) history is constituted by specific formal conditions of the possibility of historicity; (c) the logic, the method, and the truth criterion of historical knowledge is qualitatively distinct from those of the natural sciences; (d) history and nomothetic science complement and presuppose each other; and (e) structural regularities and correlations should not be considered as real causal interactional dynamics.<sup>43</sup> What follows is an elaboration of these issues.

Unlike natural sciences, history is characterized by the fact that its objects are preconstituted by the a priori forms of comprehension. However, although the matter of the history is the mind, this does not mean that historical knowledge should reproduce the subjective meanings and experiences of individual actors. On the contrary, the psychological matter is transformed into a new synthesis on the basis of the a priori forms of historical knowledge. Accordingly, Simmel's theory states, the identification of the task of sociohistorical investigation with understanding the subjective and intended meanings of social actions is another form of historical realism.<sup>44</sup> In this sense, Simmel's concept of *Verstehen* is closer to Schutz's<sup>45</sup> than to Weber's.<sup>46</sup> Simmel's rejection of historical empiricism can be summarized in three major arguments. First, following Kant, Simmel conceives of reality as an infinity of interacting elements and a chaotic multitude of perceptions. The infinite nature of the concrete reality, however, is confronted by the limited nature of the human mind, which lacks the capacity to comprehend the infinite reality. Consequently, knowledge is bound to be selective and abstract.<sup>47</sup> Second, even if reality were not infinitely complex, knowledge still could not be a representative of external reality. Simmel argues that the realization of knowledge requires the indispensable translation of the experiential data into another language. This other language, however, is a language of forms that transcend the level of facts and data and cannot be reduced to the latter. Historical knowledge, for example, cannot be identified with the set of events and experiences themselves. History, on the other hand, must exclude a great portion of events and emphasize others. History poses specific questions that offer meaning and significance to different singular phenomena. This meaning does not correspond with the intended meaning of experience itself. Simmel writes:

Every form of knowledge represents a translation of immediately given data into a new language, a language with its own intrinsic forms, categories, and requirements. . . . In order to qualify as objects of knowledge, certain aspects of the facts are thrown into relief, and others are relegated to the background. . . . Certain immanent relations are established on the basis of ideas and values. . . . The facts as objects of knowledge are formed into new construct that have their own laws and their peculiar qualities.<sup>48</sup>

Simmel maintains that the meaning of any historical object, like that of a portrait, becomes possible within the context of a specific style and finds its validity through that contextual form. No style, however, can claim more validity than any other.<sup>49</sup> Simmel's

analysis of autobiography presents a good example of this argument. Here, Simmel seems to disagree with the implicit Weberian notion of autobiography as an ideal model for hermeneutics. According to Simmel, even if the object of autobiography is identical with its own subject, it is still the case that individual's experience should be translated into a new formal language of reflection and memory that cannot reproduce the original subjective experience.<sup>50</sup> Simmel's third argument is influenced by Spinoza's philosophy. Spinoza believes that determination is negation.<sup>51</sup> In other words, totality and infinite complexity lack any determination. To be determinate, therefore, means to be limited and finite. Simmel utilizes the same argument to defend his formal epistemology: Knowledge is the process and the product of the explication of the determinations. This implies, however, that totality can never be comprehended, nor can reality be understood by the human mind. To know something, accordingly, is to negate specific aspects of reality through the selective forms of cognition.<sup>52</sup> It is interesting to note a similar idea in Simmel's concept of the tragedy of culture. Although life can be expressed only through cultural forms, form as such opposes, reifies, and prevents the creative process of life.<sup>53</sup>

But if the objects of history should not be identified with "whatever has happened," then a question arises as to the nature of the forms and conditions of the possibility of history. According to Simmel, history presupposes, among other forms, the fundamental categories of *Verstehen*, individuality, totality, significance, and existence. To know a historical event of the past implies a claim of experiencing what has not been experienced by ourselves. To put it in other words, historical knowledge implies an attribution of our ideas and experiences to other human beings. This means that *Verstehen* is a universal, a priori, and indispensable formal precondition of historical knowledge.<sup>54</sup> Unlike the nomological type of knowledge, history is interested in the category of existence. A nomological law is a timeless regularity. It is a hypothetical statement that "If *A*, then *B*." Following Kant,<sup>55</sup> Simmel argues that we cannot deduce the existence of either *A* or *B* from the nomological law of their hypothetical relation.<sup>56</sup> Nomological science is interested in "essences" and not in the "existence" of phenomena; a particular phenomenon is only an instance of the universal. History, on the other hand, deals with the existential. Consequently, it is concerned with particulars, individuals, and complete concrete totalities. However, to be a historical event requires the judgment that the event possesses significance. The feeling of significance in relation to nature is not attributed to the natural objects, but rather to the knowledge of the natural object. On the contrary, the sort of significance that we call "historical" is ascribed to the object itself.<sup>57</sup> In Simmel's words,

The threshold of historical consciousness can be grounded on a new basis. This threshold is located where the existential interest intersects with the interest in the significance of the content.<sup>58</sup>

Simmel's critique of history provides a reconciliation between the nomothetic and historical forms of knowledge formation. Each of these orders of knowledge is based on distinct forms and metatheoretical interests that are equally valid, necessary, useful, and nonreducible to one another.<sup>59</sup> Simmel emphasizes, however, that historical categories and propositions cannot provide casual assertions and regularities. Historical complexes and totalities, he argues, are indeed composite facts whose apparent structural regularities are the products of an infinite number of simpler concrete causal interactions.

Explanation requires the analysis of these complex totalities into their component causes and effects. Structural causal assertions are, therefore, oversimplifications that lack any scientific value.<sup>60</sup> To label a composite aggregate with a single name encourages one to overlook many aspects of the complex phenomenon. Even if one perceives a stage sequence in our historical observation, Simmel insists, it remains a mere descriptive proposition that must be explained by analysis of its constituent interactional dynamics.<sup>61</sup> Simmel writes:

There is no higher law that is superior to the lower, more inferior laws which regulate the motions of individual elements... only the motions of the most elementary factors and the laws that govern them are real causes. If a collection of these elementary movements constitutes a composite event, that does not mean that there is a special law governing this event. The exclusive sufficient cause and explanation of every event lies in the primary laws that govern the relationship between the simplest and most elementary processes.<sup>62</sup>

One can see that Simmel cannot accept Durkheim's explanation of one social fact by another social fact,<sup>63</sup> and the Marxist structural and causal propositions of historical materialism. He notes, however, that no noncomposite interactional level of analysis exists. What is considered a simple and nomological regularity today will turn tomorrow into a historical and metaphysical proposition. Scientific knowledge, therefore, is not an absolute truth, but rather a successive approximation to true causal interactions.<sup>64</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Simmel's epistemological approach to the problem of rationality constitutes the foundation of his ontological theory of rationality. In other words, this epistemic idealism leads him to a critique of any sociological reductionism and results in his multidimensional and interactionist theory of social action. Both historical idealism and historical materialism, Simmel argues, are products of the naive theory of historical realism. Thus, through an epistemological definition of the concept of reality, and historical relativism, Simmel radically rejects the exclusive validity of any universal history. Unfortunately for the majority of the American sociological community, Simmel's name is associated only with a "formal sociology." Although the significance of Simmel's analyses of the forms of sociation is increasingly acknowledged, the complexity of his approach to the sociohistorical reality remains largely overlooked. While rejecting any individualistic problematic, Simmel's multidimensional theory refutes all reductions of the individual human to a mere embodiment of societal roles. More significantly, Simmel's critique of sociological dogmatism leads to political tolerance and the norms of democracy. One might say that Simmel's sociological relativism in the twentieth century potentially performs a function similar to that of Locke's theological relativism in the seventeenth century. Locke's relativism asked for religious tolerance; Simmel's relativism asks for cultural and political tolerance.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. A recent scholarly example can be found in Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology: Positivism, Presuppositions, and Current Controversies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

2. For a critique of the rationalistic and utilitarian theory of rationality in Comte's works see Auguste Comte, "Considerations on the Spiritual Power," in *The Crisis of Industrial Civilization*, edited by Ronald Fletcher (London, Heinemann, 1974), pp. 236-242.
3. For a synthesis of the theories of Bentham and Coleridge in Mill's theory of rationality see John Stuart Mill, *On Bentham and Coleridge* (London: Chatto, 1950).
4. Parson's theory of rationality is exemplified in Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (New York: Free Press, 1949).
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 43-86.
6. See Jeffrey Alexander, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology: The Classical Attempt at Theoretical Synthesis: Max Weber* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
7. David Hume, *Inquiries Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951).
8. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (New York: Dover, 1959).
9. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Macmillan, 1964).
10. Georg Simmel, *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968), pp. 27-46.
11. Georg Simmel, *The Problems of the Philosophy of History* (New York: Free Press, 1977), pp. 200-202.
12. Georg Simmel, *Sociology of Religion* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), pp. 1-4.
13. For a good analysis of the concept of form in Simmel's theory see Rudolph H. Weingartner, *Experience and Culture* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1960), pp. 15-71.
14. Kurt H. Wolff, ed., *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (Glenco, IL: Glenco Press, 1950), p. 22.
15. Simmel, *The Problems of the Philosophy of History*, pp. viii-ix.
16. Simmel, *The Conflict in Modern Culture*, p. 13.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.
18. Simmel, *The Problems of the Philosophy of History*, pp. 103-163.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 187-188.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 191.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 199.
23. Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 102-119.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
25. Wolff, ed., *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, p. 16.
26. Simmel, *The Problems of the Philosophy of History*, pp. 187-189.
27. For a scholarly discussion of Enlightenment see Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Enlightenment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951).
28. A good analysis of the sociological implications of romanticism can be found in Steven Seidman, *Liberalism and the Origins of European Social Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 1-80.
29. See Jeffrey Alexander, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology: The Antinomies of Classical Thought: Marx and Durkheim* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
30. See Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*.
31. An example of sociological realism can be found in Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: Allen Lane, 1969).
32. An example of sociological nominalism is the phenomenological position of Schutz. See Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967).
33. For an interactionist theory of social action see Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969).
34. Wolff, ed., *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, p. 8.
35. Simmel, *The Problems of the Philosophy of History*, pp. 112-117.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
37. Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, pp. 102-119.
38. See Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).
39. Georg Simmel, *Conflict and the Web of Group Affiliation* (New York, Free Press, 1955), pp. 16-28.

40. Wolff, ed., *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, pp. 3–25.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
42. Simmel, *The Problems of the Philosophy of History*, pp. 76–77.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 86–87.
44. *Ibid.*, pp. vii–ix, 76–77.
45. Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*.
46. Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), pp. 4–24.
47. Simmel, *The Problems of the Philosophy of History*, pp. 83–84.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
49. *Ibid.*, pp. 80–83.
50. *Ibid.*, pp. 80–83.
51. Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* (London: J.M. Dent, 1934).
52. Simmel, *The Problems of the Philosophy of History*, pp. 80–82.
53. Georg Simmel, *The Conflict in Modern Culture*, pp. 27–47.
54. Georg Simmel, *The Problems of the Philosophy of History*, pp. 63–76.
55. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1964.
56. Simmel, *The Problems of the Philosophy of History*, pp. 168–173.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 173.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
59. *Ibid.*, pp. 104–119.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
61. *Ibid.*, pp. 109–112.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
63. Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (New York: Free Press, 1938).
64. Simmel, *The Problems of the Philosophy of History*, pp. 144–146.