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REVIEWS

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ELIZABETH S. GOODSTEIN, *GEORG SIMMEL AND THE DISCIPLINARY IMAGINARY*, STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, STANFORD, 2017.

Dejan Petrović

Barely anyone reads Simmel today, except those who are within relatively small circle of specialists concerned with the work of German author. Elizabeth S. Goodstein, Professor of English and Liberal Arts at Emory University, starts her analysis from this, rather depressing, point. There are two basic questions that Goodstein tries to answer in this book. First, why Simmel, who was marginalised in German academia during his life, remains in that position nowadays, despite his canonization as one of the founders of sociology, and second, how can his work contribute to the understanding of contemporary, ruthlessly changing, world?

At first glance, it can be said that Simmel's treatment within contemporary sociology is no better or worse than a number of authors who worked shoulder to shoulder with "the great three", Marx, Weber and Durkheim, like Tönnies, Sombart, Worms, Tarde or Michels, to name a few, who got some recognition as a kind of "second or third tier founding fathers" and are mostly forgotten today for various reasons. But beneath this level lies complex question that concerns mechanisms of remembering and attitudes toward disciplinary history as important parts of collective identity shared by one scientific community. In other words, why some things are remembered and

celebrated, while others are, more or less deliberately, forgotten?

In Simmel's case, disciplinary boundaries, unquestioned between today's producers of scientific knowledge, caused unrecognition of liminality of his work. Goodstein underlines that his work wasn't philosophical or sociological and in the same time it was both of them. Because of that, Simmel's canonization as one of sociology's founders that completely ignored important philosophical aspects of his work is part of the problem (p. 8). As author of this book points out on the account of her objectives: "Thinking his [Simmel's] liminal position can open a new and urgently needed perspective on the contemporary intellectual world, where disciplinary divisions of dubious ontological purchase have become deeply naturalized features of our mental and institutional landscapes" (p. 9). But this ambitious goal that Goodstein sets for her study was only partially attained.

Considering book's structure, it is divided into three parts. In the first part Goodstein shows a brief review of Simmel's academic career while examines the way in which his work was incorporated in anglophone, or more specifically, American sociology. The second part is concerned with Simmel's most famous book *Philosophy of Money* and here Goodstein tries

to show richness and complexity of German philosopher's thought that is mostly overlooked in today's sociology but also in philosophy. In the third part American author revisits Simmel's canonization as one of sociology's founding fathers and offers liminality that characterises his work as a cure for ossified and problematic disciplinary divisions. It should be added that Goodstein reconstructs evolution of Simmel's thought throughout the book, from his early works influenced by positivism and evolutionism through relativistic turn in Simmel's mature work to further development of his relativistic philosophy and philosophy of life in years that he spent in Strasbourg before his death.

Although Simmel's thought was changing throughout his life, Goodstein argues that there is common thread connecting mentioned phases. That thread is his desire to understand world at the turn of centuries, characterised by rapidly changing reality in which Gods met their demise and science rose to shape new hegemonic worldview. Young Simmel believed that sociology could deliver answers for the world in flux, at the end of nineteenth century. But at the beginning the twentieth century he realized that sociology wasn't enough. Philosophy was needed because sociology could give only partial answers and only from the standpoint of that particular science. Questions concerning meaning and purpose that continued to occupy human thought in the time of change, even harder than ever before, only philosophy could answer. That was the main reason why Simmel's work continued to exist in between disciplines.

As Goodstein's argument continues, liminality of Simmel's work caused hostile attitude towards him in German academia circles, particularly defensive of existing disciplinary order threatened by emerging social sciences (pp. 38–39). Behind this lies the reason for the lack of academic recognition that Simmel felt throughout his whole career and for his late appointment to the university position that came only few years before German philosopher's death. On the other hand, Goodstein's

explanation of contemporary marginality of Georg Simmel, or to put it in other words, his status of founding father whose works are barely read by anyone, is founded in the history of American sociology.

Above mentioned explanation has two components. On the one hand, as a result of personal contacts that existed between Simmel and pioneers of American sociology, such as Albion Small and Robert E. Park (pp. 98–99), parts of German author's works have been translated relatively quickly after they were originally published. But translation of his books in English in their entirety lagged considerably behind. Extreme case is greatly revised second edition of *Sociologie. Der Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* published in 1908 which remained unavailable in English until 2009 (303). Highly influential textbook edited by Ernest Burges and Robert E. Park *Introduction in Science of Sociology* which appeared in multiple editions between 1921 and 1979 contained ten selections from Simmel's work (p. 100). Goodstein argues that this appropriation by bits and pieces, without connection to larger works that they are part of resulted in creation of image of Simmel as influential but unsystematic and too essayistic author (p. 118).

On the other hand, dominance of pragmatic and research-oriented vision of sociology with Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton as its most prominent figures in post-World War II American sociology left little space for Simmel's relativistic and heavily philosophical social theory. Works of German author were located in the realms of discipline's pre-history and read without taking in account historical context in which they were created and referred to (pp. 115–118). Although this type of structural-functionalism was later rightfully criticised, Goodstein continues, twenty-first century American sociology is still characterised by "a fairly unsophisticated empiricism" and "ethic of instrumental activism" (p. 119).

At study's end Goodstein states that reading Simmel today can provide us with epistemological tools that continuously

question existence of disciplinary orders. In other words, knowledge needed to understand contemporary, always changing, world must not be constrained by disciplinary boundaries but like Simmel's thought it should be free to roam between different domains of human existence (p. 330).

If we turn now to the problems characteristic for Goodstein's study, it will become apparent that they are caused by omissions in author's arguments. In her explanation of Simmel's academic marginality during his life, implications of his Jewish ancestry are downplayed. The fact that Simmel was financially well off assimilated Jew who tried to get professorship in one of the state university centres in anti-Semitic Wilhelmine Germany deserves more than few footnotes. This also applies to his connections to socialist circles in Berlin that were only casually mentioned in Goodstein's study. On the other hand, accusations of German nationalism made by scholars after World War II caused by Simmel's support of German war efforts at the beginning of the Great War, were mentioned in the same manner. Although he later condemned war as catastrophe and suicide of European values (p. 338) and because of that was in danger of losing professorship in Strasbourg, his early enthusiasm could have the impact on reception of his work.

There are great problems concerning Goodstein's perception of sociology that make her analysis of reception of Simmel's work inadequate. This author views sociology as monolithic discipline and implicitly equates American sociology with sociology in general. This is erroneous standpoint because of number of different theoretical perspectives, national and research traditions, sometimes with great differences between them, that constitute body of knowledge called sociology today. The same applies to Goodstein's view of American sociology. No matter how strong position of American sociology on international scale is, to implicitly treat it as a sociology in general in 21<sup>st</sup> century is deeply dubious position. Goodstein's standpoint

weakens even more if it is added that most of the theoretical innovations in this discipline in the last three decades came from Europe. To put it differently, if there is a great injustice done to Simmel's work in American sociology, what is its fate within other national sociologies? Goodstein's study cannot answer this question.

In similar manner Goodstein ignores rise of micro and relativistic theoretical perspectives that occurred in United States in the late sixties and early seventies, and great impact of postmodernism on sociology in general during the eighties of the previous century. These perspectives were also characterized by qualitative research program, making them more open to Simmel's influence. It is easy to understand why German philosopher's work was misread or greatly ignored within Parsonian or Mertonian structural functionalism, but what is the case with inherently relativistic theoretical perspectives like constructivism or postmodernism? All this remains in Goodstein's blind spot because of her perception of sociology.

Finally, there is a little of Simmel in this study that has his name in its title. To be more accurate, there isn't much space given to Simmel from where he can speak through his work to a reader. This is a strange thing for a study whose author spent a lot of ink trying to convince her readers of values of Simmel's relativistic approach to social reality. As it is mentioned before some important biographical facts are only casually mentioned and Goodstein's interpretations are in times too tiresome, but in the same time author positions herself as interpreter of Simmel's work whose interpretations are more truthful than others. With this in mind it is difficult for a reader to come independently to conclusion what Simmel and his work can provide to understanding of social reality in the first decades of 21<sup>st</sup> century, which was, when all is considered, Goodstein's main intention.

In conclusion, if we put above mentioned problems aside, it can be said that Goodstein's study is noteworthy one. This is the case because serious studies of Georg

Simmel's work and life are unfortunately rather rare today and every attempt to better understand vast legacy of this imaginative and innovative thinker is certainly welcomed. Problems characteristic for this study can be related to the complexity of

its object and American author should be congratulated for the courage to explore this theme. Hope remains that similar studies will follow and *Georg Simmel and Disciplinary Imaginary* presents important referent point for them.