

How is history possible? Georg Simmel on empathy and realism

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Abstract

Georg Simmel's *The Problems of the Philosophy of History: An Epistemological Essay*, along with related works, proposes that history is largely a reflection of how well the historian can penetrate the mind of his or her subject. He rejects realism, but if scholars do not know events as they essentially were, they cannot know how much of their empathy-based knowledge is warped by their own perspective and how much is authentic. Given George Herbert Mead's analytical account of reflexive interaction and the recently discovered neural basis of empathy and its dependence on context, the present study shows Simmel's work to be far more plausible than it seemed over the past century. This essay not only demonstrates where Simmel's empathy-based argument succeeds and fails but also clarifies his view on the nature of historical reality and how the historian's perspective clarifies as well as distorts his sources. In the process, Simmel's philosophy of history is placed in a lineage ranging from Wilhelm Dilthey, Heinrich Rickert, and Max Weber to R. S. Collingswood, Robert Darnton, and other contemporary cultural historians.

Keywords

Categories of historical understanding, contextual knowledge, empathy, historical significance, inference, intersubjectivity, mirror neurons, phenomenology, realism, thick description

Georg Simmel's inimitable brilliance, not his method, theory, or findings, defines his greatness. Such is the view of his most thoughtful critics, including Emile Durkheim (1960), Max Weber (1972), Ferdinand Tönnies ([1918] 1965), and Pitirim Sorokin ([1928] 1965).¹ However, these men have ignored one of Simmel's most significant achievements: *The Problems in the Philosophy of History: An Epistemological Essay*, which attends to the subjective dimension of historical events and criticizes historical realism.

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An analysis of these matters is overdue for three reasons: first, the melding of symbolic anthropology and history (Darnton, 1984; Geertz, 1973) has deepened interest in historical actors' subjectivity and how to gauge it; second, recent developments in cognitive and neural science have rendered the inner life of historical persons more transparent; third, constructionist scholarship has increasingly drawn attention away from the realities of the past to the interests and concerns of the historian, rendering problematic the possibility of history itself. Simmel's philosophy of history places these issues in a new light.

At stake in Simmel's work is how much of the past, as it was, can actually be known. According to Oscar Handlin (1979), the historian's vocation depends on a "minimal operational article of faith," namely, that the past really exists and we can, with proper effort, discover the truth about it (p. 405). Simmel poses the problem more subtly. The existence of past events is uncontestable, but at best, one can only get a gist of their reality. Observer biases, interests, preoccupations, and values get in the way of credible estimations.

For sociologists, epistemology refers to the study of how social standpoints and social experience affect perception and knowledge (Mannheim, [1928] 1952). In contrast, Georg Simmel offers a social psychology of knowledge: psychological, because its key premise is that chronological data are converted into history by historians' personal experience; social, because it presumes that historians acquire knowledge of the past in the same way they acquire knowledge of their contemporaries, and that the interaction among historical persons themselves comprise a crucial object of analysis.

Assessing Simmel's four main points of reference, namely, *realism*, *empathy*, *intersubjectivity*, and *inference*, this essay builds upon his theory of historical knowledge.

Realism

Raymond Boudon ([1986] 1994) acknowledged Simmel's proposition that historians' perspectives determine what they make of historical reality, but he criticized it as a form of methodological individualism. Boudon does not go far enough. Consider Simmel's ([1907] 1977) own assessment of our capacity to know the past:

The task of enabling us to see the event "as it really happened" is still naively imposed upon history. In opposition to this view it is necessary to make clear that 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 specific features are emphasized. Certain immanent relations are established on the bases of ideas and values. All this – as we might put it – transcends reality (pp. vii–viii).

Although sensitive to the obstacles standing between reality and its perception, Simmel ignores those "aspects of the facts," "specific features," and "immanent relations" that do *not* transcend reality. He therefore fails to pose the question of *how much* of the past "as it really happened" can be known.

Going forward, it becomes increasingly clear that that Simmel's criticism of historical realism contradicts his frequent recognitions of reality. Yet, his anti-realist statements are the ones which distinguish him. No one can understand Simmel by denying that an observer's social experience and mental categories affect what he makes of reality.² The

question is what that experience and those categories consist of, *how much* they lessen reality's accessibility, and *how much* they increase it. Simmel's ([1907] 1977) dismissal of historical realism is, in any case, disingenuous. No one can produce an image of the past "as it really happened" (p. 77), but no one has ever *claimed* to know a historical event, let alone a historical period, as it really happened, or to know the planet Saturn, or a black hole, as it really is. The validity of all propositions about nature and society is variable.

Simmel's use of the phrase "as it really happened" makes explicit his decision to join the Leopold von Ranke critics of his day. But Simmel merely uses Ranke as a straw man. Ranke was no exponent of crude realism. He knew that knowledge of reality is mediated (Von Ranke 1973). Even Peter Novick (1988), never having overestimated the capacity of his colleagues to know the truth, admitted that Ranke tried to determine the underlying *essence* of his facts. "*Wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*," explained Novick, means "*essentially*," not "actually" or "really," thus yielding the past "as it *essentially* was" (pp. 28–29). Such is and always has been realism's goal: to grasp the essence, not the exact detail, of historical phenomena. In the words of biblical scholar Chris Keith (2010), "historical portrayals ... are not the past but *representations* of it ... [S]cholars are nevertheless warranted to *theorize* about the actual past" based on history's evidential traces (p. 69).

Nowhere does Simmel's critique of realism complicate his argument more than in his definition of historical significance. The dropping of a pin cannot be a historical event. Not until an event's consequences reach a "threshold" of intensity and impact (and become an object of "historical consciousness," as Simmel calls it) does it even merit the status of an "event" (pp. 163–168). Whether Simmel's threshold of historical consciousness can be described independently of its consequences is the question. Simmel must have believed so: he saw historical *reality* to be only partially knowable but never questioned the validity of its consequences. Consequences, however, result from the motives and actions of those who make events happen, and if one places no more confidence in the former than the latter, then historical knowledge must be even more partial than Simmel believed. The consequences of events are other events.

One need not plod through Roy Bhaskar's (1975, 1979) treatises on "critical realism" to know that realism's taken-for-granted premise, as it applies to history, could not be more modest. The meaning of an event is more often forced upon the observer by its own properties than imposed by the observer's categories of thought, worldview, or curiosity. Reality cannot uniquely determine perception, but this does not mean that observers' perceptual frames count more than reality *in the conception of most events most of the time*. History and memory would otherwise possess no survival value. Such is the "weak case" of historical realism. Simmel's "strong case" of historical realism attributes to realist historians the motive to recover the past as it was. Such a motive, and such historians, never existed. In question, therefore, is what function Simmel's critique of realism performs in his general perspective on history. "Less than is commonly believed" is the answer. Here, one confronts directly the nature of Simmel's epistemology.

Phenomenology

Simmel's first (untranslated) edition of *The Problems of the Philosophy of History* appeared in 1892, but he replaced it with a second (1905) edition which he describes as

an entirely new book (reprinted in German with slight amendments in 1907). In 1918, however, Simmel ([1918] 1980) sent a letter to Heinrich Rickert announcing yet a third book on the same topic. "In the course of the years," he wrote, "my views have become much more radical and atrociously complicated" (p. 7). Simmel never completed this book, for he learned of his terminal liver cancer shortly after writing Rickert and chose to devote his remaining days to *Lebensanschauung* ([1918] 2010). However, Simmel did complete three historical essays, each "atrociously complicated" but no different psychologically from the volume he had completed 9 years earlier.³

Philosopher Gary Backhaus (2003a, 2003b), however, claims that Simmel's 1918 history project expressed his gradual abandonment of Kant (a precursor of cognitive psychology) in favor of what he believes to be a perspective consistent with phenomenology. This alleged transition is the basis of Simmel's contribution to historical knowledge. In 2003, Backhaus edited a special issue of *Human Studies* which contained his introductory essay and three other articles on the relation between Simmel's philosophy of history, with its focus on the mentality of the historian and Simmel's relation to the later work of Husserl and Heidegger. The general aim of this special issue is to demonstrate that good history must be phenomenological history, which places less emphasis on events' causes and consequences and more on the thought, feeling, and actions of their participants.

Backhaus' work is the first serious attempt to build upon Simmel's essay on historical knowledge. It is a noble effort, although silent on *how* Simmel's method describes the historical person phenomenologically, that is, his "structure of consciousness," his "acts of consciousness," and how the historian can "bracket" an event in order to disclose his subject's "pure consciousness" of it. These concerns were not part of Simmel's program. Backhaus falls short because the a priori which make history possible appear just as frequently during Simmel's last writings as they did before and during 1907.

Backhaus's claim (see also Owsley and Backhaus, 2003) that Simmel rejected Kant in the years preceding his death is significant because it bears on the question of whether his 1907 argument would have been more or less convincing if expressed in 1918 in phenomenological terms.⁴ Simmel's later essays, in fact, added nothing significant to his 1907 neo-Kantian work. Whether or not the frame of these essays foreshadowed those of Husserl and his successors is an entirely different and, as will be demonstrated, irrelevant matter. It also diverts attention from Simmel's adamant (neo-Kantian) overestimation of historical a priori as determinants of historical perception.

Simmel's intellectual world

In his translation of Max Weber's assessment of "Georg Simmel as Sociologist," Donald Levine (1972) states, "Simmel's pioneering forays into the philosophy of history provided a persuasive argument for a methodology based on the procedures of empathic understanding (*Verstehen*) and the use of ideal types in historical reconstruction" (p. 155). Simmel's forays into the philosophy of history were in truth pioneering, but his search for a methodology based on empathetic understanding differed from Weber's and was less successful than Levine suggests.⁵ Also, to find Simmel applying ideal types is difficult because he conducted little historical research wherein such types would prove useful.

Part of the German subjective tradition is the revival of Kantianism, beginning in 1860, 2 years after Simmel's birth, and ending in the early 1920s, shortly after his death (Willey, 1978). Inspired by Immanuel Kant, Simmel saw in history, or, more exactly, in the historian, "the general objective of preserving the freedom of the human spirit – that is, form-giving creativity" (Levine, 1972: 5). Such creativity is one of Simmel's problematic a priori. If the historian is liberated from his world, then all his or her interpretations are permitted – a prescription for intellectual anarchy, not enlightenment.

Simmel's perspective on history nevertheless reflects the intellectual climate of *fin-de-siècle* Germany. National traditions, according to Levine (1995), circulate around distinct postulates. As the German tradition took the individual as its ultimate unit of analysis, historians proceeded from three interrelated presuppositions: that no event can be understood outside the meaning which participants attribute to it, that self-determination (subjective voluntarism) transcends external constraints, and that emancipation and freedom are based on the power of the inner will (Levine, 1995: 181–211).

Georg Simmel rarely mentioned Wilhelm Dilthey or Heinrich Rickert in his work, but their debate over the distinction between the natural and social sciences was so intense that it must have influenced him. Rickert believed the two sciences to be similar because they both employ concepts as keys to knowledge (for instance, force, mass, and velocity in the physical sciences; power, authority, and legitimation in the social sciences). By contrast, Dilthey believed that only *one* concept can produce social scientific understanding, and that is the concept of intuition, which gives access to the subject's inner nature. The intuitive observer re-experiences in his own consciousness the experiences of others. Because Dilthey was silent on how this re-experience could be achieved, he left his readers at a dead-end. Max Weber, on the other hand, attributed the scientific character of natural and social science to *procedural* similarity, that is to say, a coherent and systematic set of methods, each unique to its own subject matter.

Simmel conformed as closely to Dilthey and Weber as did most of his German colleagues, but, as will be shown, his epistemology set him apart. Max Weber's procedure, *verstehende Soziologie*, provides a useful point of comparison to Simmel's. "Explanatory understanding," as opposed to "observational understanding," in Weber's (1947) words, is "a rational understanding of motivation, which consists in placing the act in an intelligible and more inclusive context of meaning" (p. 95). His *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, for example, stipulates that belief in work as an end in itself is the product of a religious culture that takes the world as God's temple and finds in worldly success the best sign of His favor. Weber comes to this conclusion not by occupying the mind of any individual but by working his way through a mass of evidence tapping the believer's economy, polity, and culture, including religious institutions, texts, and his own written words. For Simmel and for Dilthey before him, *Verstehen* was an effort to understand the inner-motives of the individual actor. For Weber, *Verstehen* was a method of understanding the subjective meaning of *social* action (Hewa and Herva, 1988 [emphasis added]), which presumes knowledge of the economic and religious cultures in which historical events occur. In other words, the meaning of Calvinism, not John Calvin's inner-motives, was Weber's concern.

The Protestant Ethic also exemplifies *Sinnzusammenhang*, which refers to a number of elements whose meanings form a coherent whole, captured by the terms "context of

meaning,” “complex of meaning,” or “meaningful systems” (p. 95). “Context,” “complex,” and “system” are also evident in Simmel’s work, but to compare it to Weber’s, which includes stunningly detailed comparisons among the religions and economies of Western Europe, India, China, and Ancient Palestine, is to reveal its shallowness.⁶ In all realms of nature, there exist points at which quantitative differences are so great as to become qualitative, and this point manifests itself in Weber’s and Simmel’s differing conceptions of contextual analysis.

The relatively weak function Simmel ascribes to context is too evident to ignore, for the strengthening of that function renders his conceptualization of historical figures more compelling. *How* to relate the individual’s inner life to its social context is the problem.

Empathy

Simmel referred often to the a priori of historical understanding, but he never presented even a partial list of them. That empathy (*emfühlung*), a distinctive feature of the German tradition, was Simmel’s major a priori is, however, certain. Initially developed by German philosopher Theodor Lipps, *emfühlung* (literally, “feeling into”) was widely considered to be the most effective means for the analysis of subjectivity, past and present alike (for detail, see Stueber, 2008; Makreel [2008] 2012; Harrington 2001; Collingwood 1949).⁷ As Simmel put it, “the projection of ideas and feelings onto an historical individual is an irreducible, integral act. Nevertheless, one of its necessary conditions is the following: the historian must have experienced the relevant mental processes in his own subjective life” (p. 67).⁸ This assertion must be stressed because it differentiates Simmel from other social scientists. Georg Simmel makes the inner life of both the historian and the historical person his central points of reference.

As history is relative to the mental categories of the historian, the latter must include “the conceptions, intentions, desires, and feelings of personalities. In other words, persons are its subject matter,” and because this is so, “personal identity ... is obviously a methodological presupposition of history. Independent of this presupposition, it would be impossible to classify and understand historical data. It has the status of an a priori, a condition for the possibility of history” (Simmel, [1907] 1977: 39, 62). Although one wonders why Simmel insists on the historian’s sharing the experience of his subject, his emphasis on “personal identity” as an a priori implies that historical events are products, not determinants, of their participants’ mental lives. That the historian can use his own empathetic powers to realize the makeup of these lives is Simmel’s core premise. The *mental* dimension of historical process therefore requires the following ideal: “history should be a form of applied psychology” (Simmel, [1907] 1977: 39–40). Furthermore, “[i]f there were a nomological science of psychology, then the relationship between history and psychology would be the same as the relationship between astronomy and mathematics.” More concretely, “If history is not a mere puppet show, then it must be the history of mental processes” (Simmel, [1907] 1977: 39–40).

So far, so good. Putting aside Simmel’s claim that the historian and his subjects’ experiences must be the same, many scholars are intent on knowing what was going on in the minds of those relevant to their work. Was Thomas Becket trying to protect the integrity of the church or to make a name for himself through martyrdom? Were most of America’s

founding leaders, in an age of rationalism, sincere in their belief in a *divine* Creator? Did President Harry Truman employ the atomic bomb for military, political, or racial reasons? Did Saddam Hussein expel United Nations inspectors because he had something to hide or because he wanted to give the impression he had something to hide? After Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, would he have reneged on its terms if the Confederate government agreed to stop fighting and rejoin the Union?

These questions concern motives and beliefs, and their answers can be not only inferred but also hypothesized. Historical fiction, for example, includes novels and plays which enlarge and brighten the meaning of historical events by *creating conversations* among their participants and attributing motives to them. Consider Carl Sandburg's account of Abraham Lincoln's prairie and presidential years, Robert Sherwood's *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* – both Pulitzer-Prize winners – Gore Vidal's *Lincoln*, written in consultation with David Donald, arguably the best Lincoln scholar of his time, and William Safire's *Freedom*, a remarkable novel in which every episode is documented. These works contain no fictional characters; all were men and women who knew Lincoln and/or whom Lincoln himself knew. Based on the same sequence of events, then, no author is free to create any phrase or conversation he or she likes; each must construct talk which readers find plausibly motivated, consistent with the subject's actions and, thus, objectively possible. Because trustworthy historical fiction is based on empathy, it exemplifies what Simmel means when he declares good history to be "the history of mental processes."

However, Simmel's (1980) claim that experiences of distant and recent historical figures must be essentially similar to one's own and to one's acquaintances, and known in the same way (through empathetic correspondence and projection), carries important implications:

Our understanding of the apostle Paul and Louis XIV is essentially the same as our understanding of a personal acquaintance. The understanding of these properties presupposes that there is an essential identity between us, a sense in which we have the same nature ... The kind of understanding peculiar to history is embedded in our view of understanding in general (p. 97).

To make contact with a historical person, therefore, requires what Robert Merton (1972) defined as "insider knowledge." As Simmel ([1907] 1977) puts it,

Whoever has never loved will never understand love or the lover. Someone with a passionate disposition will never understand someone who is apathetic. The weakling will never understand the hero, nor will the hero ever understand the weakling (p.65).

Simmel's certainty about this matter is evident in the redundancy with which he states his case:

The historian who is a pedantic philistine and accustomed to the life of the petit bourgeois will not be able to understand the expressions of the lives of Mirabeau or Napoleon, Goethe or Nietzsche – no matter how profuse and perspicuous these manifestations may be.

Likewise, "the hopelessness with which the European understanding confronts the oriental mind is acknowledged by orientalists." Here is the point: the greater the social distance from another, the less one can know about him. Specifically, "[t]he sense of

disparity or dissimilarity between the nature of the historian and the nature of historical persons makes understanding *impossible*" (Simmel, 1980: 100, Emphasis added). No comparative historian could accept Simmel's statement, for it suggests that historical knowledge is inherently local: only Germans can write German history, only women the history of women, only American Blacks the American history of Blacks. Historians must be specialists. Only young and poor Black Southern women can understand their forebears, only young and poor White Southern women theirs, and so on. In short, it takes one to know one.

Excursus: Empathy in light of developments in social psychology and neural science

Empathy never ceased to be a concern of social scientists, but their renewed interest in the concept was triggered in the 1990s by the discovery of mirror neurons.⁹ Italian scientists observed that the same neural cells in macaque monkeys' brains were activated when (1) a monkey performed an action and (2) when that same monkey observed another monkey perform the same action (Rizzolatti, 2007). Because neural mirroring enables understanding of what another is experiencing, it makes intersubjectivity inexorable: *historians empathize with their subjects whether they want to or not*. Emotions as well as physical movements can be objects of empathy. In the contagion of yawning, laughing, mourning, enthusiasm, and the like, individuals' gestures reciprocally excite their own neurons as they excite the corresponding neurons in others. (For general discussion of imitation, empathy, and mirror neurons, see Iacoboni, Molnar-Szakacs, Gallese, et al, 2005; Iacoboni, 2009.)¹⁰

The likeness among Marco Iacobi's analysis of mirror neurons, George Herbert Mead's reflexive self, Charles Horton Cooley's (1902) "personal idea," and Georg Simmel's understanding of empathy is unmistakable. At the very time Simmel brooded over the philosophy of history, Cooley (1902) independently developed his concept of the "personal idea." "The imaginations which people have of one another, Cooley avowed, are the *solid facts* of society, and to observe and interpret these must be a chief aim of sociology" (p. 121). Cooley, like Simmel, distinguishes between idea and reality, but the personal idea is the immediate social reality, the thing in which men exist for one another ... Thus any study of society that is not supported by a firm grasp of personal ideas is empty and dead – mere doctrine and not knowledge at all (p. 124).

In Simmel's words, it is a mere "puppet show." To no field did Cooley find his concepts more applicable than history, whose persons and their ideas literally pepper his works from beginning to end.

Cooley's personal idea escaped Simmel's knowledge. George Herbert Mead ([1934] 1962) developed his conception of self and reciprocal role taking in the 1920s, shortly after Simmel's death. Because we call out in ourselves the thoughts and actions we evoke in others, we not only know how to interpret their gestures and words but also know how they will interpret ours (pp. 42–226). In face-to-face encounters, mirror neurons thus provide for self-consciousness, self-control, and perceptions akin to mindreading.

Simmel knew little or nothing about Cooley or Mead, but the affinity of the three with Theodor Lipps is no accident and currently raises widespread comment.¹¹ Late twentieth-century developments in the related psychological fields of person perception and attribution theory are rarely if ever applied to historical studies or to Simmel's epistemology, but their affinities with Simmel and the significance which they add to his work are unequivocal.

Although mirror neurons constitute the neural foundation for empathy, their activation is variable (Jarrett, 2012, 2013; Keen, 2006; Molnar-Szakacs and Iacoboni, 2007; Shane, 2008; University of California at Los Angeles, 2007; Winnerman, 2005) in at least four respects, each of which bears on Simmel's historian and his subjects:

1. When we watch another person in distress, certain neurons are excited – the very same neurons excited when we were in distress. But some people are more empathetic in this regard than others and feel the pain of others more deeply.¹²
2. The brain is hardwired to see those we know as similar to ourselves; thus, strangers activate our neurons less readily than acquaintances. Nevertheless, we understand the actions of strangers, even actions we are unable to perform ourselves. If we see someone doing a somersault, we realize we are not doing it although we recognize it for what it is. This is because mirror neurons are opposed to or joined by other sensory neurons. The implication for Simmel's notion of historical understanding is straightforward: anyone can empathize with a historical person, including the victim of crucifixion, without sharing his experience.
3. Mirror neurons are affected by practices. Experiments demonstrate that cells can be made more or less excitable by culture, brief and simple training tasks, the narrative structure of texts, and even medications.¹³ Historians, as noted, are born with the gift of empathy, but they must cultivate it before they can apply it to historical questions.
4. Mirror neurons activate more intensely when actions are contextualized than when they are not. Consider a table containing a cup of tea and plate of cookies. Movement of another's arm is experienced more often as grasping the cup for drink when cookies are on the table than when the cup sits on the table alone. When the table is covered with crumbs, arm movement is experienced as taking the cup away. These perceptions of action and context occur automatically and unconsciously, which may or may not be an advantage to the historian. To penetrate another's mind spontaneously, without thinking about it, makes research efficient as long as it leads to valid perception. But empathetic powers often lead to invalid perception – especially when the person with whom one is concerned deliberately gives off a false impression of himself (Goffman, 1969) – another reason why empathy must be properly conceptualized before being put to scholarly use.

The above qualifications are necessary to understand fully the application of empathy to historical analysis. Historians and history educators have long debated the advantages and pitfalls of employing empathy as an analytic tool. The National Standards for History provide us with as good a summary of scholarly consensus as any other source: competent history depends on

the ability to describe the past through the eyes and experiences of those who were there, as revealed through their literature, art, artifacts, and the like, and to avoid 'present-mindedness,' judging the past solely in terms of the norms and values of today (Yilmaz, 2007: 332-333).

Such empathetic descriptions must embed their object in its own, not our, social surroundings. Max Weber believed that "it is a great help to be able to put one's self imaginatively in the place of the actor and thus sympathetically participate in his experiences, but this is not an essential condition of meaningful interpretation." This is because the meaning, not the motive, for an action is what Weber was after. Simmel's target was more subjective: he wanted to get inside the historical person. He deemed context important only because historians cannot effectively exercise their empathetic faculties without it.

Contextual analysis itself, on the other hand, cannot disclose everything we need to know about a person's intentions or an event's meaning. This point cannot be overemphasized. As will be shown, much is made by today's social scientists and historians of context in the acquisition of knowledge. All knowledge, they say, is context-sensitive. No one can deny that many layers of context, including the trauma and costs of World War I and the British anti-war climate of opinion in 1938, make sense of Neville Chamberlain's appeasement of Adolph Hitler in Munich (Foster, 1999). Despite Chamberlain's vast support among the British public, however, other British leaders, having experienced the same trauma of the Great War, embedded in the very same social world and mindful of its opinion, believed differently and criticized him vigorously. Here, we come to the limits of what context can tell us. If context were the pivotal determinant of how an event is perceived and acted upon, then Simmel's concern for the mentality of the historical actor would be utterly misplaced. In fact, variance of individual thought, feeling, judgment, and action is often greater *within* a given social context than *between* two or more such contexts. Knowledge of these within-context differences, Georg Simmel would say, is empathy-dependent.

People act differently in the same situation because they match their opinions to different objects. Historical empathy appears in a stronger light when considered in terms of this matching process. Simmel's investigator does in fact think of his subject with the same *mental faculties* he uses to think about his friend next door, but the *substance* of what he wishes to know about his subject and what he wishes to know about his neighbor differs.

These "mental faculties" may be summarized. Empathy is a thinking process, and thinking involves a matching of symbolic models against the state of the real world (Galanter and Gerstenhaber, 1956: 77-78). By symbolic model, Galanter and Gerstenhaber refer to its common definition: "A thing that represents or stands for something else, especially a material object representing something abstract" (Jewell and Abate, 2001: 1720). To empathize with Neville Chamberlain, therefore, is to understand how he matched his judgment of Hitler's promises (symbolic model) to the traumatic effects of World War I (state of the world) and empathized with the people's war-weariness. Thomas Becket, facing death, was thinking when he adorned himself with symbols of martyrdom and matched them against what he knew of the Crown's determination to dominate the church through his death. Abraham Lincoln was thinking when he matched his symbolic object, his eulogy for the Union war dead at Gettysburg, to the state of his world, including bitter criticisms of his management of the war by political adversaries sharing his speaker platform, not to mention his awareness of the people's belief that Northern men and boys

were dying to save the Union, not to free slaves. In short, the thinking that went into Chamberlain's appeasement, Becket's challenge to the Crown's power, and Lincoln's words about democracy's debt to its fallen soldiers exemplifies the empathizing process: to project onto historical figures, *given knowledge of their predicaments*, the words and actions which those predicaments would invoke in oneself.¹⁴

Empathetic genius and history

No one can deny that a person who has undergone the same experience as another – like a fellow prisoner, soldier, victim, or oppressor – may have an advantage in understanding over one who has not. Simmel's empathy model, however, would be more plausible if, instead of placing the mental activities of long-dead predecessors on the same plane of access as the mental activities of contemporaries, he simply claimed that we best understand predecessors whose experiences resemble our own. This claim is perfectly consistent with recent empathy research: the more acquainted we are with another, the more powerfully his or her conduct activates empathy's neurons (Keen, 2006: 224; p. 16 above; Molnar-Szakacs and Iacoboni, 2007). But what is to be done when we come across persons who make absolutely no sense to us? Must we dismiss them or might we at least recognize that they once made sense to someone? Simmel has an answer.

Opaque events and their men can be rendered transparent by introducing a social type, *the genius*, to supplement the mental power of ordinary historians. The genius, as Simmel explains, assembles a coherent and plausible history from the slightest hints about the past. Asking where these hints come from, however, brings us to the least plausible part of his analysis. Like many if not most of his contemporaries, Simmel still took seriously the ideas of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck.¹⁵ “[Our] body,” according to Simmel ([1907] 1977), “retains the acquisitions of many thousands of years of evolution . . . In the same way, our mind preserves the results and traces of earlier mental processes from different stages of the evolution of the species” (p. 96). Put differently, “[m]ental processes that are quite remote from [the individual's] experience are reproduced in his mind; this is because they are stored in his organism as *genetically transmitted recollections*” (p. 96 [emphasis added]). These recollections also exist in the mind “of persons who are otherwise not so gifted,” but they become aware of them when the genius supplies the activating information (Simmel, [1907] 1977: 96).

Simmel's ([1907] 1977) biohistorical statement adds a genetic element to his empathy theory, and this element reveals how Simmel talked himself out of facing the historian's classic problem: how to describe a historical person from fragmentary evidence, a person who lived in a world totally alien to ours. Such a person becomes visible when we are able not only to penetrate his mental world but also reconstruct its intersubjective aspects.

Intersubjectivity

Mirror neurons, as noted, make the human being an empathetic creature, but Simmel recognizes the limits of merely knowing the inner lives of *individuals*. Intersubjectivity (how individuals think and feel about one another) is a necessary element of historical knowledge. Specifically, “[h]uman subjects embedded in their milieux constitute the

basic reality, and thus the grasping of the intersubjective experiences of individuals is basic to understanding history” (Simmel cited by Owsley and Backhaus, 2003: 211). To understand history is to penetrate the mind of two or more historical figures, describe their attitudes toward one another, and then assess their effect on the development of an event.

Among the best general formulations of intersubjectivity is George Herbert Mead’s ([1934] 1962) distinction between “play” and the “game” (pp. 162–164). To play, as he sees it, is to take the role of another – one person at a time: thus, one plays at being a policeman, cowboy, or baseball player. In the game, the individual takes the role of all participants. A baseball player must know what everyone on the opposing team will do if, let us say, he bunts the ball with a runner on base. “Each one of his acts is determined by his assumption of the action of the others who are playing the game. What he does is controlled by his being everyone else on that team ...” (p. 154).

Action is not the only medium of social relationships. Pain, emotions, body language, moral judgments, identification – these are aspects of what Vittorio Gallese (2001) calls the *shared manifold of intersubjectivity*. Simmel prefigures Mead’s and Gallese’s points. During the French Revolution, he explains, the Hébertists enjoyed close relations with Robespierre, but they broke from him when he assumed the new government’s most powerful position. “Given certain underlying psychological presuppositions, these facts qualify as a thoroughly intelligible sequence” (p. 48). Because Simmel never tells readers what these “psychological presuppositions” might be, they cannot know why this particular sequence is more intelligible than another.

If Simmel’s “psychological presuppositions” are similar to George Herbert Mead’s and Vittorio Gallese’s, however, then the sequence clarifies itself. Jacques Hébert, like Georges Danton, aligned with Robespierre in his opposition to the Girondists, but as the Revolution unfolded, Hébert *knew* that his writings, which revealed his fierce hatred of Christianity and his political radicalism, would prove inconsistent with Robespierre’s Deism and infatuation with Rousseau. To say Hébert “knew” is to say that he felt in himself the same responses he *believed* his public statements would evoke in Robespierre. Putting himself in Robespierre’s mind, he found his own statements offensive but not insufferable. Hébert underestimated his old ally’s sensitivity to criticism – an empathetic failure (but nonetheless an empathetic act) which cost him his life.

Simmel’s example of failure can be supplemented by one of success. In “Mincemeat,” a British operation during World War II, intersubjectivity itself appears as a historical event. This operation centered on a body dropped into sea-currents which carried it to Huelva, Spain. Attached to the body was a wallet with seemingly authentic personal effects and a briefcase chained to the corpse containing letters signed by the commanders who would lead the imminent invasions of Greece and Sardinia. The fact that Spanish authorities would turn over the body to the Germans was never in question. As significant numbers of German troops moved away from Sicily, the British knew they had successfully penetrated the minds of their Axis counterparts. Precisely how they did so is evident in the Mincemeat commander’s account, which in turn illustrates Simmel’s view of intersubjectivity:

What you, a Briton with a British background, think can be deduced from a document does not matter. It is what your *opposite number*, with his German knowledge and background, will

think that matters – what construction that *he* will put on the document. Therefore, if you want *him* to think such-and-such a thing, you must give him something which will make *him* (and not *you*) think it ... [A] German does not think and react as an Englishman does, and you must put yourself in his mind (Montagu, 1953: 73. See also Goffman, 1969).

This instance of intersubjectivity, like Simmel's Hébertist example, illustrates the successes and failures of persons accurately to "feel inside" and gauge the motivation of others. More generally, no one can understand the Second World War independently of Churchill's thoughts about Roosevelt, and vice versa, and the beliefs, feelings, and morals which they, Hitler, and Stalin attributed to one another. This is what Simmel ([1907] 1977) means when he defines "the conceptions, intentions, desires, and feelings of personalities" as history's subject matter (p. 39). By adding a reflexive (Meadian) term to Simmel's formula, intersubjectivity assumes greater descriptive and explanatory power.

Inference

Reliance on empathy and intersubjectivity as methods of accessing the past is useful only if the context in which historical persons conduct themselves is raised to a sufficiently high level of explicitness. Consider, with Simmel, a reporter witnessing an event:

We are inclined to think that it is almost impossible for him to describe exactly what he saw ... Even if he makes the best efforts to adhere to the truth, the narrator adds elements to what he directly observes, aspects which complete the event in the following sense: they identify what he infers from what is really given ... Precisely this spontaneous supplementation is one of the strongest proofs of the following proposition: these mental processes are not simply deduced from the facts ... (Simmel, [1907] 1977: 46).

Simmel's own thoughts require supplementation. Observers gain information from their subjects by empathizing with them, by inferentially evoking in themselves the thoughts and feelings they would think and feel in their subjects' place. The validity of all empathetic assessments, however, is partial and varies from case to case. On the other hand, these assessments are based on inferences from what is "really given." If Simmel has no knowledge of the reality which the reporter is describing, he cannot know which elements are being supplemented. Nor can he know their meaning. Is the reporter unwittingly or deliberately ignoring crucial facts? Is he projecting his own values and tastes onto the event? Do his distortions make the event more consonant with readers' biases?

The puzzle of Simmel's scenario, then, is its silence as to what portion of what "really happened" the observer captured. Also, the reporter, regardless of Simmel's stipulation, can only draw inferences from what he sees if he *remembers* what he sees. This point is obvious when only a few hours separate the observation and the report; it is less obvious when the passage of time is counted in years, decades, or centuries, and when the observation becomes increasingly dependent on "carriers," "agents," and their media. The fact that historical witnesses' memories of an event are recorded and passed on to descendants is an a priori which is absent from Simmel's epistemology.¹⁶

Above all, if Simmel's *negative* reference to "supplementation" is correct, then we find ourselves in the empiricist position of concluding that only statements about observed, not

inferred, realities can be true. And if the empiricists are right, then much of our knowledge of the world, which is inferential, must be discarded. One who imagines a historical reality unsupplemented by the observer's experience, known solely from direct observation, is imagining a "reality" that never existed; all historical knowledge, from memoirs, diaries, and other written documents to fossils and skeletal remains, turns on inference based on partial knowledge ("inference to the best explanation," as the philosophers of science call it).

In this regard, it is convenient for Simmel to illustrate his case against historical realism with an event covered by only one reporter. Multiple observers, like four journalists recording the 9/11 collapse of the Twin Towers from four different directions remember four different aspects of the same event and write four different reports which, in their assemblage, reveal more of its reality than would be possible for a single reporter to capture. When perception is a collective rather than individual enterprise, reality becomes more accessible than Simmel leads one to believe.

In cases where the documentation of an event is more meager than 9/11, the historian's imagination plays a more crucial role. For example, Simmel believes that historical reality exists in chunks which the historian must synthesize into a continuous narrative on his own terms:

"[H]istory creates a fictitious, hypothetical life the contents of which are linked on the chain of a *single* concept," whereas "real life" is a product of innumerable interruptions and lapses in these sequences, breaks which necessitate a continuous process of retrospection and synthesis (Simmel, 1980: 155).

Might "real life" consist of continuity rather than "interruptions," "lapses," and "breaks"? In this regard, Simmel might be compared to William James (1895: 239), who believed that "real life" is a life of ideas and that consciousness is a stream of ideas that so blend into one another as to make it impossible to say where one ends and the other begins. Whether continuity is to be construed as real or fabricated might be arbitrary, that is, true or false depending on the research question. In either case, one cannot fail to notice Simmel, the anti-realist, referring to "*real life*," the discontinuity of which is, for him, a historical *a priori*.

Empathy and context

The distinctiveness of historical eras would be self-evident if historical reality were as chunky as Simmel believed, but Simmel's historian is compelled to partition his own "fictitious" historical continuum in order to identify these eras. The research problem is to empathize with the men and women living in them, which is only possible if knowledge of era-specific social worlds is accessible. Simmel ([1907] 1977) himself declared that one infers the mental state of another person "*from the appearance of certain external symbols and signs, that one may take these symbols and signs as the units of a context or temporal frame*" (p. 202n, emphasis added). Unfortunately, he never took his "external symbols and signs" and "temporal frame" seriously enough. The shortcoming *invites* repair, and if that repair is successful, many criticisms of Simmel's epistemology can be answered.

“Whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone else’s inner life,” Clifford Geertz (1973) discerned, “we gain it through their expressions, not through some [direct] intrusion into their consciousness. It’s all a matter of scratching surfaces,” namely, the objective surround of the person in question (p. 73; see also 58n). This “objective surround” includes the social institutions, moral values, practices, beliefs, traditions, and texts for and against which this person acted and in terms of which he thought about and presented himself. Moreover, Simmel fails to make independent observations of mentalities and their contexts. Indeed, for any thought, action, or event, he seems to be able to deduce a context to make sense of it. Even more, he never finds contexts to be problematic, while the subjectivities inferred from them are at best partially plausible. At least Simmel assumes as much. Hatred, to take one example, is an emotion we can identify at once, and understanding it is a simple matter of finding its source. Accordingly, “I understand the Hanoverian’s hate for Bismarck if I am acquainted with the war of 1866 and the Prussian Annexation” (Simmel, 1980: 109). This is yet another example of Simmelian “thin description,” which never gets beyond the surface of contexts and their men. Who is this Hanoverian to whom Simmel ascribes hatred? Which aspects of the 1866 war and Prussian Annexation offend him? Did some Hanoverians not welcome Bismarck? A comparable question is which aspect of the American Civil War induced White citizens of the Confederate states, more than three quarters of whom owned no slaves and competed *against* slave labor, to hate the Union and its president and risk their lives on the battlefield? Credible answers to this question can be inferred from the mental life of the ordinary White Southerner, but only against the background, independently analyzed, of his culture and its institutions.

Empathy, cultural history, and opacity

Discoveries from neural science, social and cognitive psychology, when linked to the most prominent achievements of cultural historians, produce sound understandings of Simmel’s history-making individual. These discoveries are fundamental because the historian cannot break directly into the mind of any historical person. Individual expression takes place within a general idiom provided by culture, and culture is retrievable through tangible objects which represent that idiom (Griswold, 1987). Simmel presents a different argument. Documents which obstruct empathy with historical persons, he believes, are of limited use to the historian – which implies that our deepest understandings take place where the content of those minds are most transparent. But consider Simmel’s methodological claim in terms of Clifford Geertz’s (1983) “thick description”:

In all three of the societies I have studied intensively, Javanese, Balinese, and Moroccan, I have been concerned, among other things, with attempting to determine how the people who live there define themselves as persons, what goes into the idea they have (but, as I say, only half-realize they have) of what a self, Javanese, Balinese, or Moroccan style, is. And in each case, I have tried to get at this most intimate of notions not by imagining myself someone else, a rice peasant or a tribal sheikh, and then seeing what I thought, but by searching out and analyzing the symbolic forms – words, images, institutions, behaviors – in terms of which, in each place, people actually represented themselves to themselves and to one another.

To “search out symbolic forms,” as noted, is to activate ideas of things and persons that stand for an abstract entity that might not be otherwise expressed – or expressed unclearly. Take a concrete instance: George Washington’s resigning his commission to Congress on 23 December 1783, 2 years after the British surrender at Yorktown. James McHenry attended and described the scene to his wife:

Today my love the General at a public audience made a deposit of his commission and in a very pathetic manner took leave of Congress. It was a solemn and affecting spectacle; such an one as history does not present. The spectators all wept, and there was hardly a member of Congress who did not drop tears (Schwartz, 1987: 142).

McHenry’s “thin description” thickens when we realize what all the crying was about. The dropping of tears makes sense as soon as we match a symbolic model (Washington) eagerly surrendering his power to the paranoid strain (Hofstadter, [1973] 2008) of the culture he served, a culture whose members believed that every man is born with a lust for power which only the cultivation of virtue can check. The native-born of this culture, since the turn of the seventeenth century, feared concentrations of power and interpreted innocuous actions on England’s part as a grand design to “enslave” her colonies (Bailyn, 1967). Scores of letters, paintings, and lithographs represent the power-hungry “state of the world” to which Washington’s suspicious contemporaries matched his eagerness to relinquish his authority and return home. Of this connection, which led the ceremony’s designers to affirm Congress’s authority over the military, Washington was aware, and the designers were aware of Washington’s awareness. They knew their man, just as he knew them. By so earnestly yielding to Congress, Washington rose above it. Doing so, he made it possible for historians and social scientists to “feel into” the minds of his audience.

Conclusion

Few scholars have had as much influence on American sociology as Georg Simmel, but his philosophy of history, despite its relevance to the sociology of knowledge and memory, remains obscure. Donald Levine et al.’s (1976a, 1976b) comprehensive two-part essay on Simmel’s influence in America never mentions it. The fact the English translation of *The Problems of the Philosophy of History* appeared a year after Levine and his students published their review is symptomatic of this work’s belated as well as limited impact. Almost 40 years after this translation, however, an unprecedented number of scholars seek to know empathetically the inner world of contemporary and historical figures. It is time for Simmel’s work on the topic, therefore, to be more widely known and understood.¹⁷

The Problems of the Philosophy of History can be brought directly to bear on specific issues in the sociology of history. The first issue is what distinguishes a historical event from what Jan Assmann (2006) calls the “junk” or “trash” of the past. Simmel’s ([1907] 1977) answer to this question is straightforward but incomplete. An event’s “importance is not a property of the [event] itself, but rather a property of its consequences” (p. 164). But consequences are themselves historical events. To what extent historical persons’

understandings of events are projections of the historian's perspective on them is the second issue. Simmel assumed that gaps in the historical narrative are inevitably "filled in" by the historian's experiences, moods, and moral values. He would be more credible if he claimed instead that historians articulate the past credibly by partially valid *inferences* based on observable albeit imperfect documentation.

These matters might not be worth raising if Simmel's intended fourth edition of *Problems in the Philosophy of History* were more or less psychological than his third. But his final words on the subject reinforced rather than repudiated his earlier ones. True, Simmel's later work *reemphasizes* the subjective lineaments which define his initial writings; but he takes no new direction. Phenomenology was certainly not the only novel path he could have taken. Having subordinated his final historical statement to *Lebensanschauung* (Simmel, [1918] 2010), for instance, one might expect the former to bear the vitalistic markings of the latter, which would parallel Henri Bergson's ([1911] 1975) *élan vital*. But even Simmel's concept of *life* offers no fresh account of any historical event.¹⁸

Georg Simmel's legacy remains incomplete until its significance for epistemology, the philosophy of history, and, more generally, the sociology of knowledge and memory is recognized. For a long time, that significance was limited, and for this, Simmel had only himself to blame. When he decided to dissect the conceptual foundations of history, he could have given admirers a model to challenge both his immediate successors: Karl Mannheim, Rudolph Bultmann, Maurice Halbwachs, and his later successors – Carl Becker, Hayden White, Michel Foucault, among the many others who interpret the past in terms of observers' ways of thinking about it. He could have emphasized not only the impossibility of knowing historical events in their totality but also the indispensability of partial knowledge as a basis for understanding anything. He could have thrown suspicion on the great masters of suspicion, showing that reality's distortion, in the typical case, must be limited; that if it were not, man could make no sense of the world and could not survive within it (Schwartz, 2015). He could have urged us to contemplate the relation between empathy and reality, rather than reducing reality to its empathetic perception. He could have shaken the smug skepticism of his contemporaries and successors. Instead, he insisted, as did they, that history reflects the working of our minds independently of the essence of our past.

Every philosophy is grounded in what Arthur Lovejoy (1948: 11) calls a metaphysical pathos, a pattern of sentiments that envelops its propositions and refutations. The pathos of Georg Simmel's philosophy is fatalistic; as it stands, it tells us more about how we manage to get things wrong about history than how we get things right.¹⁹ The assessment of Simmel's problems of historical knowledge, however, must include its positive elements, especially its suggestiveness and potential for expansion.

Great scholars are judged not only by the validity of their arguments but also by their capacity to raise new questions and to stimulate hunches and research to answer them. No one can read a page of Simmel's work, even where he is mistaken, without being dazzled by one or more counterintuitive insights. Max Weber states this incongruity best:

In evaluating the work of Georg Simmel, one's responses prove to be highly contradictory. On the one hand, one is bound to react to Simmel's works from a point of view that is overwhelmingly

antagonistic. In particular, crucial aspects of his methodology are unacceptable. His substantive results must with unusual frequency be regarded with reservations, and not seldom they must be rejected outright ... On the other hand, one finds oneself absolutely compelled to affirm that [his] exposition is simply brilliant and, what is more important, attains results that are intrinsic to it and not to be attained by any imitator. Indeed, nearly every one of his works abounds in important new theoretical ideas and the most subtle observations. Almost every one of them belong to those books in which not only the valid findings, *but even the false ones* (emphasis added), contain a wealth of stimulation for one's further thought, in comparison with which the majority of even the most estimable accomplishments of other scholars often appear to exude a peculiar odor of scantiness and poverty. The same holds true for his epistemological and methodological foundations and, again, doubly so just where they are perhaps ultimately not tenable (Levine 1972: 158. See also Nedelmann, 1994).

Simmel's "wealth of stimulation" and "new theoretical ideas" bear on imperfectly understood historical issues, including issues that Dilthey and Rickert raised but never resolved. What mental processes precondition historical understanding? How is it possible to "feel into" the mind of a historical person? Are mental categories and processes a posteriori, obtaining from experience, or are they a priori, due to the nature of the mind, then imposed by the mind on reality? Can one determine the relative contribution of experience and mental process to historical knowledge? How can any phenomenon residing outside the domain of direct experience be understood? Are thresholds of historical consciousness and significance objectively valid or dependent on observers' interpretation of their consequences? Are barriers to essentially valid historical narratives intrinsically insurmountable? Does thorough information about *context* produce even better knowledge of a historical event or person than *direct evidence*? Is direct evidence, that is to say, uninterpreted historical data, even possible? No cluster of issues could more powerfully excite fresh thinking, theorizing, and research in Simmel Studies and the sociology of history and knowledge. Simmel, like Dilthey and Rickert, made no headway on these issues and, like them, led his readers to a dead-end. In the hindsight of more recent discoveries in neuroscience and cognitive psychology, however, Simmel's focus on empathetic understanding strikes the historically oriented scholar as demanding reappraisal.

Perhaps the major cause of Simmel's weak influence on historians and historical sociologists was his faulty belief that psychological evidence is superior to contextual evidence. Just as a prosecutor can produce no "conviction" without strong circumstantial evidence, *which in the vast majority of trials outweighs direct evidence*, so the historical investigator can assess no eyewitness account of an event without painstaking research into the social world in which he or she conceived it. The problem is to achieve "contextual validity" in order to explain events convincingly.

Return to Simmel's historical figures. They are strangers living and dying long before their observers were born. We must find and analyze the words, mores, images, and structures in terms of which we can empathize with their inwardness. From this perspective, Clifford Geertz's (1983) understanding of "The Native's Point of View" warrants qualification. For Geertz, to know the forms and dynamics of a stranger's inner life "is more like grasping a proverb, catching an illusion, seeing a joke, ... or reading a poem than it is like achieving communion" (p. 70). But if empathy, the calling out in our own minds what we observe in others', is not exactly communion, it is something like it.

Inference from authentic and context-laden documents and objects is how we gain most of our knowledge of history. But Simmel insists that those documents and objects are useful only if they enable us better to empathize with our subjects. New developments in cultural history as well as neuroscience, and psychology, as this essay has shown, has enabled us to do so more effectively and thus better realize the promise of Simmel's epistemology.

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Notes

1. These critics recognize Simmel's goal, namely, the establishment of a social science based on such social forms as group size, exchange, domination and subordination, faithfulness and gratitude, fashion, conflict, among others. Simmel's procedure is to select one of these forms, then sample illustrations from different realms, from face-to-face behavior to international relations, with a view to identifying the properties they have in common. The term "analogy" is often used to describe this method. One nation mediating the conflict between two other nations, for example, is said to be analogous to one individual mediating the conflict between two other individuals. This analogical method, which evokes the most criticism, is said to produce nothing more than a classification of various instances of a single concept. Simmel's analogies are based on illustrative data but are not data-driven; he samples from no universe of information, conducts no statistical or qualitative analysis. His analogical procedure is dubious, say his critics, because social forms are meaningless when divorced from their contents.
2. The relative weight assigned to the reality of the historical object – whether person or event – has been underestimated in historical research. Simmel's American contemporary, George Herbert Mead, observed within a decade of Simmel's death that "Every conception of the past is construed from the standpoint of the new problems of today" (p. 353). Maurice Halbwachs (1925), whose great classic, *The Social Frames of Memory*, appeared 6 years after Simmel's death, declared later that "collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past that adapts the image of ancient facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the present" (Halbwachs, 1941: 7). More recently, Pierre Nora (1998) claimed that "What matters is not what the past imposes on us but what we bring to it" (p. 618). The relevance for Simmel's epistemology could not be more evident. It is the *occupant* of Mead's standpoint who observes historical persons and events. Halbwach's "beliefs and spiritual needs of the present" affect nothing; it is the beliefs and spiritual needs of a particular *historian* which connect present and past. Likewise, before *we* can see the link between past and present, a historian must find it. Simmel's focus on the individual mind's capacity to modify reality is, thus, a tendency that is stronger now than ever.
3. For his assembling and introducing Simmel's essays on the philosophy of history, we are all indebted to Gary Oakes (1977: 1–38, 1980: 3–96). His editorial remarks as well as his translations are essential to securing the foundations of Simmelian epistemology.

4. For a more general discussion of “indirect social relationships” and relations with “predecessors,” see Schutz (1970, 231–234).
5. More on how Simmel’s account of empathetic understanding differs from Weber’s *Verstehensoziologie* can be found in Weber (1947: 8–29). See also Weber (1949): 49–188.
6. In contrast, Simmel (1979) condensed the varieties of religious experience into a single mode. Catholicism, Lutheranism, Methodism, the Baptist sects, and Calvinism can be understood as expressing one underlying form, namely, *piety*, a form that minimizes the substantive differences among these religious groups. This reduction, the reduction to piety of the complexity and variation of religious cultures, exemplifies criticism of Simmel’s “analogies” and “social forms.”
7. Every historical event, as R. G. Collingwood (1949) saw it, has an “outside” and an “inside.” The outside is the observed event we record, like an election campaign or revolution; the inside refers to the thought, emotion, and judgment of the participants.
8. To the objection that no two historians can have the same experiences, Simmel declared that his proposition can never be more than a hypothesis; “however, it functions as an a priori of all practical and theoretical relations, between one subject and another” (p. 45). A priori based on *hypotheses* are unsound foundations for historical propositions, but such is Simmel’s claim.
9. Scholarly interest in empathy, indexed by the number of articles published and archived by JSTOR, remained flat during the first 60 years of the twentieth century, then increased exponentially after 1960. Beginning in 1990, the same pattern of incremental increase appeared in *Dissertation Abstracts*. The discovery of mirror neurons’ relation to empathy accelerated this already rapid growth. After 2010, the number of dissertations devoted to this relation settled on a higher plateau.
10. Mirror neurons, empathy, and reflexivity, in the view of many neuroscientists, contribute to *homo sapiens*’ survival through natural selection.
11. Similarity in the perspectives of George Herbert Mead, Charles Horton Cooley, and Theodor Lipps has been noticed by observers too numerous to mention here.
12. For a list of empathy scales, see Center for Building of a Culture of Empathy, <http://www.cultureofempathy.com/references/Test.htm>.
13. Initial tests show that the hormone oxytocin promotes empathy among patients with post-traumatic stress disorder.
14. Furthermore, the contemporary historian’s empathy is informed by what he knows about recent discoveries in psychology. Julian Rotter’s (1966) external and internal loci of control, Leon Festinger’s (1954, 1957) cognitive dissonance and self-comparison process, Daniel Kahneman’s (2011) experiencing self and remembering self – there is every reason to assume these psychological tendencies, among others, drove the behavior of historical figures as they drive ours. Our ancestors, near and distant, were different from us, just as our contemporaries differ, but this variation does not permit us to deny our similarities, even where the former outweigh the latter. General principles of psychology produce many of the historical realities to which our empathy leads us.
15. The fact that Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* ended belief in Lamarck’s theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics is commonly believed today, but many decades passed before the scientific community accepted the concept of natural selection. Darwin and Lamarck were *both* prominent at the turn of the twentieth century.
16. The transmission of memory occurs in two principal manners. Max Weber believed that ideas survived across time only if they were sustained by carrier (*träger*) groups, which include religious institutions, social strata, informal groups, and organizations. In contrast, Kurt Lang and Gladys Lang (1990) found the reputations of etchers to be preserved by *individual* agents who had an interest in preserving the value and status of their work (see also Fine, 1996). Whether

witnesses be groups or individuals, their memory is the immediate source of history, but disagreements persist on how well memory represents historical reality. Maurice Halbwachs ([1950] 1980), writing within several years of Simmel's death, denied that traditional memory and history coexist; the former must end, he said, where the latter begins. Pierre Nora (1989), following Halbwachs, insists that history and memory are opposed to one another, that memory's fate is to be pulverized by history. Some historians, including Jacques Le Goff (1992), declare that memory is history's raw material but is invariably warped and dependent on empirical sources to correct it (see also Assmann, 2006; Burke, 1989). Other historians, including Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1992), claim that memory is the only antidote for historical error.

17. Recovery of Simmel's historical epistemology in the twenty-first century is hardly unique. The history of natural and social science is full of names which had been forgotten for decades, then recovered because new developments made them relevant. In 1866, Gregor Mendel published his book demonstrating that "invisible factors" (now called genes) were responsible for the physical characteristics of pea plants. Thirty years passed before the significance of his work was recognized. Nicola Tesla was well known for his many mechanical and electric inventions, but he was forgotten after his death in 1943. Almost 20 years later, a unit of magnetic force was named after him; 50 years later, "Tesla Motors, Inc.," producer of electric cars, helped secure his memory. In 1915, Robert Hertz, one of Emile Durkheim's best known students, perished in the fighting of World War I. Forgotten, except for a single annual lecture by E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Rodney Needham (1973) recovered Robert Hertz's work on symbolic dualism by publishing an influential book of writings based on Hertz's classic "The pre-eminence of the right hand: A study in religious polarity." Needham did so during the peak of interest in structuralism in anthropology and sociology. Twenty-five years later, a sudden interest in empathy and discovery of its relation to neuroscience and cognitive psychology sparked the present essay on the methodological facets of Georg Simmel's philosophy of history.
18. Simmel's *Lebensanschauung* makes scattered comments on the past insinuating itself into the present and vice versa (p. 7), distinguishes between formal commemoration of the past and individual memory (p. 7) and the construction of a continuous history from seemingly discontinuous events (p. 119), but one finds no sign among these ideas of a Simmelian version of Bergson's *histoire vitale et créative*. Indeed, Simmel's separation of *life* and *form* sharply distinguishes him from Bergson.
19. Simmel's fatalism is also stirred by modern man's alienation from his own past. If history is part of an oppressively "objective culture," as he calls it (Frisby and Featherstone, 1998; see also Frisby 1984), a world in which the sheer volume of historical facts confounds as it informs, then the blasé attitude (Simmel, [1903] 1971: 324–339) and indifference toward tradition must assume pride of place. Paolo Jedlowsky (1990) generalizes Simmel's perceptions in this regard to history and memory:

Being intellectual and discontinuous, modern experience does not seem to be intrinsically linked with memory ... The growth of archives, libraries, and museums brought past contents to the present, but "the amount of past knowledge ... rapidly became so [prodigious] as to overwhelm any individual's possibility of really incorporating it into his own personal culture ... [O]n the contrary, older forms of memory were of course less precise, but they impelled more direct participation of the subject in the act of memory" (pp. 141, 145. See also Podoksik, 2010).

Overwhelmed by the objectivity of his culture, modern man possesses more information about the past than his predecessors but understands and identifies with it less.

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