do. But, as Blanc notes in her discussion, they believe it could be done better if economists were more inclusive both in defining the proper subjects of economics and in the appropriate methodologies, and if economists’ models of human behavior were less individualistic. We would learn more if economics were “freed from the straightjacket of masculine mythology” (p. 13), if economics added to its tool kit “imaginative rationality” (Nelson), opened up the marketplace of ideas (Strassman), included the feminine perspective (McCloskey), challenged dualistic thinking (Jennings), and recognized the parallels between masculinist and racist assumptions (Williams).

Do sociologists need economists to tell us what’s wrong with the rational actor model? Of course not: Some of the criticisms made here have been made by sociologists. Nonetheless, I think this book is valuable for sociologists. Perhaps because neoclassical economists are so very clear about their assumptions, it is easier to see them. Do we need feminists to tell us what’s wrong? As several of the contributors and discussants (Rebecca Blanc, Rhonda Williams, Robert Solow, and Helen Longino) note, criticisms similar in spirit have been made by others who do not identify themselves as feminists. Yet I think that a feminist standpoint is likely to make it easier to see intuitively what’s wrong with the current way of doing things. Although Blanc criticizes the contributors for not saying more about what a feminist economics would look like, I think that in the end we may not want distinctively feminist economics—or a distinctively feminist sociology, for that matter. Certainly “rational actress” sounds strange. But along the way, we can learn much from the smart feminist economists who contribute to this volume about how to go beyond economic man, and beyond the rational actor as well.

References


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The “time has come,” Donald N. Levine recently declared in this journal (May 1994, p. 454) “when sociologists no longer need view Simmel’s master work as a distant, mystifying text. Now it can be grappled with, used, abused, and refined just like any other classic.” Do the two books on Georg Simmel under review here vindicate his observation? The Swedish sociologist Sellerberg bases her book on Simmel’s observation that social phenomena are constituted by the co-presence of contradictions. As an empirical researcher, she is interested in discovering this “blend of contradictions,” as the title of her book reads, in various social fields, such as the attitudes toward fashion, consumer behavior, the relations between staff and patients in geriatric hospitals, the occupational role of the waitress, and the role of motherhood. Her deep insights into these fields, on the one hand, and her intimate knowledge of Simmelian sociology, on the other, are the pillars on which she builds a bridge between two isolated sociological tribes, the tribe of theoretically oriented Simmel scholars who, in contrast to their master, very often are blind to the concrete social world that surrounds them and the tribe of field researchers who hardly know his work.

Sellerberg does not explicitly draw on the work of prominent earlier bridge builders, such as Peter M. Blau, Lewis Coser, Erving Goffman, Robert K. Merton, and Donald N. Levine, nor does she follow their procedure of selecting specific hypotheses from Simmel’s sociological work and elaborating them further in empirical research. Instead, Sellerberg goes the other way around. She revisits the empirical results she has found in the past in light of Simmel’s methodological point of view.
view of "interactionism," unpacking this notion with the following three points: (1) the elements which interact in a specific social phenomenon contradict each other, (2) the contradictions induce change or, to use Levine's translation (CS May 1994, p. 454), self-actuating (eigendynamische) processes, and (3) these processes have "paradoxical consequences." These three points—contradictions, change, paradoxes—are the main sections of her book.

Under the first heading, she discusses five empirical cases, each of which is introduced with a pointed Simmel quotation. (The curious reader who wants to trace these quotations in the original text is very often—in Chs. 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10—left without pagination; this is also the case in the bibliography, where careful pagination is missing.) Among these chapters it is especially the example of conversations about food among patients in geriatric institutions that she develops with great wit and sensitivity. Joking about food, called "restrained expressivity," is a strategy the elderly use to express their own opinion about food without exposing their egoistic wishes in the group, one of the mortal sins in Swedish culture. In this example Sellerberg not only shows convincingly how contradictory norms are resolved in practice but also gives deep insights into the microcosm of Swedish culture. For a further differentiation of her findings, they could be linked fruitfully to those presented by Robert K. Merton in his "Sociological Ambivalence." This is especially true of her analysis of the contradictory occupational role prescriptions the waitress in railway restaurants has to reconcile.

The examples Sellerberg has chosen in the two other sections give further proof of her as a highly original and careful social researcher; just read what she has discovered about fashions in food, in clothing, or in the selection of Christian names for Swedish babies (elaborated in more detail in her book Avstånd och attraktion [Distance and attraction], written in 1987 [Uddevalla: Carlssons Bokförlag])! At the same time, however, the elaboration of these examples raises some doubts concerning the consistency with which she uses the three basic analytical concepts of contradiction, self-induced change, and paradox. Her work can be seen as encouragement for other scholars to elaborate these concepts further both theoretically and empirically. The main research questions left open by Sellerberg concern, first, the assumption of the ubiquity of contradictions in social phenomena, second, the specification of the notion of self-acting processes, third, the concept of paradoxical effects, and fourth (and perhaps most important), the assumption of the necessary connection between these three concepts. It is her merit to have confirmed the importance of this type of theoretical and empirical Simmel research, initiated by such giants as Merton and Levine.

It is useful to keep in mind Sellerberg's demonstration of the contradictory effects of fashion in attracting and distancing when turning to the book by Deena Weinstein and Michael A. Weinstein. Using the fashionable theories of postmodernism and deconstructivism, visible on the cover of their book in the deconstructivist typography, the Weinsteins playfully create a borderline between two academic communities, the community of postmodernized ("good") Simmel followers and the community of traditional ("bad," i.e., impressionistic, aesthetic, pessimistic, unhistorical, unsystematic, etc.) Simmel theorists. They make the straight Simmel theorist, as the reviewer would define herself (being not modern, postmodern, postmodernist, postmodernized, or even postmodernized [ized]), feel like wearing a miniskirt in the midst of tattooed and body-pierced punkers. But as one can learn to overlook the safety pin in a punker’s nostrils, one can also learn to overlook the Weinsteins’ deconstructivist style of writing. Therefore, rephrasing the welcoming ritual with which the Weinsteins greet the members of other tribes: “Salute” to postmodernized Weinsteins and welcome into the international Simmel fan club!

After having written three articles on Simmel in an old-fashioned way (reprinted as Chs. 4–6), the authors make, as they confess, “the postmodern flip (half turn).” It was their encounter with Jacques Derrida which converted them. In chapter 7, they confront the two heroes with each other (or, should I say, the heroine with the hero, because, in a fictive conversation, the authors make Simmel appear to Derrida as a woman), in chapter 8, Simmel (now a man) meets Nietzsche, and in chapter 9, two Foucaults are confronted with (one) Simmel. Some of the reading raises doubts about whether the
authors’ postmodern flip (half turn) did not after all turn out to be a double salto mortale (free fall)? Whatever labels are appropriate or not for the nine articles collected in this book, they all focus on a fundamental and genuine Simmel topic, namely, the problem of individuality in modern culture. The introductory chapter contains not confessions of faith in postmodernity and deconstructivism and the division of Simmel scholars into two opposing worlds but also a most important section, “On the Visual Constitution of Society.” Here the authors give a penetrating reinterpretation of Simmel’s analysis of the mutual glance—for Simmel, one may recall, the prototypical interaction in modern times. They proceed in linking this reanalysis with Sartre’s study of the “objectifying gaze.” This section is so important for the reflections the Weinsteins make in their final chapter that one wonders why they did not elaborate it in a separate chapter and integrate it with their astute observations on contemporary television culture. What happens to the central features that interaction processes, following the prototype of the mutual glance, give rise to in the modern metropolitan world (reciprocity, bidirectionality, and velocity) when individuals are reduced to passive onlookers and one-directional gazers in a world in which reality is filtered through and defined by television? And what happens to individuality in a world in which objective culture has become too weak to produce subjective culture?

The last chapter can be read as a provocative answer to these questions. It goes beyond simply summarizing the different interpretations the authors have made throughout the book of the three main Simmel texts, “The Metropolis and the Spirit of Life,” “The Crisis of Culture,” and “The Conflict in Modern Culture.” In a truly Simmelian/Sellerbergian paradox, their deconstructivist approach turns into a highly constructive contribution. In “making points that Simmel never made” (p. 209), they enrich and, perhaps, even revolutionize his theory of individuality. Their reading of the Simmel texts and of the contributions of other contemporary cultural theorists produces three versions of subjectivity (imploding, exploding, and hypothetical), giving three different answers to the challenges of objective culture (cultural dependency, vital rebellion, and the development of multiple identities). Just as Simmel was influenced by the First World War when writing his last contributions to the theory of culture and individuality, so the Weinsteins are influenced by the horrors that characterize the time we live in, and they theorize about them. They define our times as the “post-Holocaust” era, characterized by “the repetition ad infinitum of the worst: some Bosnians here, some Kurds there, and so on” (p. 218). In such a world there is neither room for (Habermasian) optimism nor, it may be added, for (Simmelian) pessimism or enthusiasm for war.

The Weinsteins’ choice of deconstructivist style can now be understood better (and in a Simmelian sense) as perhaps the only possible form left for us theorists to present ideas that otherwise would perhaps be overlooked or ignored altogether. According to them, contemporary subjects have turned into “terminal subjects” whose main activity consists in (passively watching) killing, suicide, and genocide; for them, play has become a survival strategy. Contemporary Simmel theorists, the Weinsteins and the reviewer included, mirror this process: Having turned into “terminal theorists” whose main activity consists in passively theorizing about “the repetition ad infinitum of the worst,” we perhaps find the only survival strategy consists in developing new, playful forms of writing and theorizing—out of fashion as they be the very minute they appear in print.


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Any book with chapter titles such as “Tremble, Hetero Swine!” (Cindy Patton), “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay” (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick), and “Right On, Girlfriend!” (Douglas Crimp) cannot be a bad thing for social theory. The impulse behind these articles and their companions in Michael Warner’s edited volume is exciting (and modeled quite directly on feminist social