HIST 585-006: Special Topics in History:
(cross-listed with ILA 790-007, PHIL 789-004, CPLT 751-055)

Topic: From Simmel to Adorno

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<td>Goodstein</td>
<td>TH</td>
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Semester Description:

In recent years, the sociologist and philosopher of culture Georg Simmel (1858-1918) has been discovered and rediscovered by scholars in a wide range of fields. He has been lauded as a theorist of modernity—and as post-modernist avant la lettre. His writings provide a seemingly inexhaustible source of brilliant aperçus for literary scholars, philosophers, and social scientists in search of insightful observations from the previous fin-de-siècle, and his remarks on fashion, on femininity, on the intricacies of social life, on the metropolis, are ubiquitous. However, the oft-touted Simmel renaissance has not necessarily resulted in sustained engagement with his work. His magnum opus, the Philosophy of Money, remains high on the list of famous yet unread books, and his considerable influence on twentieth-century thought remains largely invisible. Simmel’s own prediction that his legacy would be “like one in cold cash,” invested “according to the nature of the heirs” in diverse undertakings that rendered its origin unrecognizable, proved all too accurate. In this seminar, we will, therefore, read Simmel and his more famous students and interlocutors—Lukács, Mannheim, Kracauer, Benjamin, Adorno—in an attempt to discern Simmel’s influence and to understand the reasons he has remained on the margins of intellectual history.

As a writer, Simmel was a modernist in the broadest sense, an elegant stylist with intellectual interests that spanned the full range of high and low modern culture. His highly aesthetic mode of theorizing in essayistic tours de force that leap dizzyingly from idea to idea embodies a modernist commitment to self-reflection upon the significance of form. Simmel conceived of modern “forms of life” as both empirical objects and manifestations of more profound realities. Through theoretical syntheses centered on topoi such as sociability, travel, and urban life, he developed a modernist philosophical perspective that links the historical process of objectification to the modes of experience it produces. His approach—as much style of thought as hermeneutic method—brought the concerns of the German philosophical tradition into conversation with modern cultural realities. It is an approach that resonates in the writings of the better-known philosophers and cultural critics who were his students and readers. The goal of this seminar is both to give Simmel his rightful place in the intellectual history of modern thought and to explore the potential of his interdisciplinary method for integrating symbolic and empirical dimensions in the analysis of cultural phenomena in our own time.

Required Textbooks, Articles, and Resources:


3. ---Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms, ed. Levine [Levine].


5. Theodor Adorno, Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life.


7. Georg Lukács, Soul and Form.


Recommended Textbooks, Articles, and Resources:


2. Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings, Ed. David Frisby, Mike Featherstone [SC].


5. The Theory of the Novel, Georg Lukács.

Pulled from the Fall 2013 Institute of Liberal Arts Course Atlas.