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INTRODUCTION

Simmel trained as a philosopher, and sociology started out as a past time for him. But he saw a specific message embedded in sociology, a message so important in its effects on his students and readers that we now consider him a founder of sociology. According to this message things are often not what they appear to be. A hidden agenda may exist in a proposal, a deeper meaning to a sentence. And usually, what something means depends on the context in which it is seen and on the perspective from which it is looked at.

Simmel also warns against rushing to any decision about what is real or imagined because if a person acts on the basis of his or her imagination, the action certainly results in something real. Besides, there are to Simmel multiple realities, and he sets out to study the conditions under which people think things are real (Simmel 1892a, vol. 1: 6).

Simmel's message means something for people today. He wrote about *the stranger*, and large numbers of persons have left the area in which they grew up, moved to a city where they did not know other people and were *strangers* when they arrived. But Simmel shows how being foreign is not what it appears to be on the surface: It really is a quality of the relationship between the native and the newcomer.

He wrote about *competition*, and many people living today work next to colleagues and companions who strive to be better or perform faster than they, so they have to *compete* with them. And whether competition exists in a society or not has far reaching consequences that are not visible on the surface. – Simmel wrote about *religion*, and humans of today have many different ideas on what religion is and whether or not it is still needed. But many of them wonder if their grandfather or mother who died has completely disappeared or *continues to exist* somewhere in some form. – These few examples show that Simmel's writings are important because they deal with topics that concern modern man and because Simmel deals with them in a novel way that was frequently not understood in his own days.

Simmel observed the enormous social, economic, and political changes that occurred in Europe during his lifetime (1858–1918). The development of Prussia and under its leadership of Germany from a predominantly agrarian society to industrialization, the rise of capitalism, the unification