

On the Methodology of Social Science*

By Georg Simmel**

I.

The question of the essence of knowledge^I – its meaning, its origin, its justification – seldomly disquiets the human mind as would be befitting for the depth and significance of the issue.¹ As long as cognition provides useful content for both the practical as well as the ideational facets of life, we do not question its foundations; only when, based on our inner needs, we conceive of its results as unsatisfactory or antagonistic do we elevate the crucial problem of its justification, its meaning, its validity of this cognition^{II} to the forefront. Thus Kant’s epistemological critique formed, spanning a century and a half of the development in the natural sciences with the exception of mathematics and mechanics, and this critique was enthroned as legitimized knowledge contents, thus erecting a terrible contrast vis-à-vis the needs of the mind.^{III} Social-scientific cognition appears today to require a principled critique of itself, since in the never-ending disagreement about its content only one thing emerges without dispute: Its inadequacy in terms of the pressing need of time, which nevertheless seeks to appeal to this cognition.

The great contrasting viewpoints on all knowledge also appear here. On the one hand, an empiricism which concludes the historical description of social

* Translated by Mark McAdam, Stefan Kolev, and Erwin Dekker.

1896. “Zur Methodik der Socialwissenschaft.” *Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung, Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft im Deutschen Reich* 20 (II): 575–85.

Rudolf Stammeler. 1896. *Wirtschaft und Recht nach der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung. Eine socialphilosophische Untersuchung*, Leipzig: Veit & Co., 668 pages. The following remarks do not constitute a comprehensive examination of the thoughtful and profound work. In particular, the epistemological criticism of historical materialism which is contained within it will be impossible to overlook by its proponents or opponents.

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¹ General remark by the editors: To avoid ambiguities as much as possible, we will translate “Erkenntnis” as “knowledge,” “Erkennen” as “cognition,” “Erkenntnis-” in composites as “epistemological.”