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# THE SIMMEL REVIVAL: A Challenge to American Social Science

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“You’ve got the money and I’ve got the time . . .  
and money is all it takes . . . and you’ve got the style it takes”  
—John Cale and Lou Reed, *Songs for Drella*

American sociology has always harbored ambivalence towards its European forebearers. While acknowledging its debt to Weber and especially Durkheim, it has been slow to assimilate their powerful critiques of capitalism and especially the scientific enlightenment that accompanied its development. To be sure, the teaching of “classical” sociological theory in US universities dutifully transmits Weber’s rueful statement that scientific rationality, as modernity’s supreme intellectual achievement, has led to a certain “disenchantment” of the world. And, Durkheim’s description of the dark side of the division of labor—the emergence of the anomie as a distinctive feature of modernity—are recounted and fruitfully applied, but only to the study of “deviance.” Typically, however, the broader implications of this social category remain unexplored.

We may explain this absence by recalling the degree to which our intellectual life has been shaped by what C. Wright Mills once called “The American Celebration” (Mills 1963). Of course, the great nationalist sociologist Talcott Parsons allowed for the general applicability of anomie, but only at times such as depressions and other down periods of the business cycle when, in his words, “large numbers of people are thrown with relative suddenness out of adjustment with certain important features of their social environment” (Parsons 1949, p. 335). In this short, but revealing passage, Parsons sets the ideological tone for virtually all subsequent sociological work in the United States. Most people are integrated into the social structure; individuals and groups experience disarticulation or disorientation and may engage in conflict only under special conditions since, the cultural and the economic systems normatively maintain equilibrium. Thus, as early as the mid-1930s, Parsons still relies on the biological models that animated early American sociology which, under the influence of Herbert Spencer adopted a version of social Darwinism, sadly still an underlying motif of a significant tendency of American social thought. Even his later adoption of a version of systems theory may be seen as an extension of the bio-physical underpinnings of Parsons’s sociology.

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But, this was not the only dimension of the influence of scientificity on social theory. Equally important, and following the lines of inquiry suggested by classical English economic and political theory, Parsons directed his colleagues and students to ask not the historical question that is, how is it possible that the social order changes, but directs our attention to the contrary issue: what are the conditions for social stasis? For, to ask the question of how whole systems may be transformed is to ask an essentially speculative question which, for Parsons and other positivists, may be appropriate for philosophy, but have no place in science (Parsons 1949, p.6)

Thus, early in *The Structure of Social Action* we are introduced to the leading ideas of positivism and empiricism and, specifically, to their methodological underpinnings in Hobbes and Locke. Not surprisingly, we discover that their conception of the science of society is intertwined with two crucial ideas that, for Parsons remain operative for US sociology to this day: (1) the presupposition of the rationality of social action, what Parsons calls utilitarianism, and currently forms the basis of neo-functionism; and, (2) the invocation that sociology is concerned to generate "scientifically verifiable knowledge" about action-situations (Parsons 1949, p. 5-6)

Since Parsons's canonical *The Structure of Social Action* (1937/1949) and the further development of some of its major conclusions by Robert Merton (1947) American sociology is preoccupied, even obsessed with the problem of "methodology" (actually a positivist discipline's shamefaced way of smuggling epistemology into social science) specifically: (1) how to develop methods of social inquiry that permit empirical verification of a given proposition about the social world; and (2) limiting the construction of propositions to those which can be subjected to empirical test (of course, Parsons's own work, which was firmly rooted in the older, speculative tradition never followed his own prescription). At the same time, unlike Parsons himself, who may be regarded as the last major American sociological theorist for whom philosophy and natural science were living traditions, sociology has, for the most part, abandoned the "big" questions, largely because they fall outside the methodological precepts of empirical inquiry; and because sociology has, more or less deliberately, decided to confine its objects to areas that conform to the presumed criteria of scientificity and utility in social investigation.

With the publication of *Structure*, American sociology began its rapid shift away from the broad theoretical orientation of its early founders, especially Georg Simmel who, as we shall see below had been, until the late 1930s next to Spencer and Comte, perhaps the best known European social theorist in this country. Parsons's signal achievement was to have crafted a theoretical canon for sociology that corresponded to positivist precepts to which Simmel, if not entirely hostile, was surely at odds. Certainly, in contrast to Simmel for whom the term "science" signified a multiplicity of discourses-philosophical as well as empirical-Weber and Durkheim, consistent with their own kantianism, sought to establish sociology as an empirical science whose relation to philosophy was, at best, that of distant cousin. Parsons tells us that his book was not meant to render an account of theories of a given group of writers, but instead to address the theory of social action as an *empirical science* and, for this reason, based its inclusions and exclusions on whether writers accepted the main features of positivism. Parsons theoretical system was itself deeply rooted in the evolutionary biologism of Spencer and his American heirs-Lester Frank Ward, William Graham Sumner, Charles Cooley and, particularly the physiologist LJ Henderson, Parsons' most salient influences, was the idea that "all empirical observation is 'in terms of a conceptual scheme'" a precept that distinguishes positivism from empiricism, but one that seems to elude many contemporary practitioners.

But, despite the fact that *Structure* was, perhaps the most powerful statement of social theory since Lester F. Ward's monumental *Pure Sociology* (1903) and his program was crafted in the context of a parallel movement to transform social sciences into a under-laborer of social policy, Parsons was not entirely successful in naming the theoretical canon. For example, whereas Weber's call for disinterestedness in scientific inquiry has been adopted as a kind of mantra of sociological ideology and Durkheim's methodological dictum to treat society as a social fact remains the starting point of sociological inquiry for all but a relatively small minority, Parsons's claim to the whole tradition of neoclassical political economy and, especially Pareto's theory of nonlogical action, a version of ideology theory for sociology never established deep roots in the American branch of the discipline. And political economy, did not, until the fairly recent emergence of "rational choice" sociology whose debt to the neoclassical theorist Alfred Marshall is rarely made clear, (especially to its normal science practitioners who may not have read or heard of him), enter the mainstream of sociological thought. Neither do sociologists, except the diminishing coterie of those who practice political sociology, pay much attention to the legacy of classical English political theory let alone Machiavelli, Montesquieu and Rousseau.

Nor, was Parsons able to marginalize, not to say entirely exclude, the marxist tradition from sociology. Consonant with prevailing perceptions of the 1930s and 1940s, including those of marxists themselves, in *Structure* Marx is treated as a political economist whose "permanent importance" for sociological theory was that his theory of exploitation introduced *power*, more specifically "bargaining power" into social scientific discourse. (Parsons 1949, p. 107ff). According to Parsons, in contrast to the Hobbsian conception of the market as a prescription for "chaos", Marx was able to explain how conflict was a structuring relationship of capitalism. Here Parsons anticipates the later work of Ralf Dahrendorf who argues that the success of the labor movement in the economically and technologically advanced societies was to have stabilized capitalism and secured substantial redistributive justice without recourse to revolutionary struggle. (Dahrendorf, 1959) But, for Parsons, Pareto offers a more satisfying theory of power because it does not rely on labor as the central category. Similarly, the work of Ferdinand Tonnies is treated in a "note on *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*" and is integrated into the narrative of the development of sociological theory solely as an adjunct to Weber (Parsons, 1949, p. 688–694). Yet, while Tonnies is today all but unread except for specialists, the marxian tradition in US sociology has always commanded some attention even as it was marginalized for the same reason: its implicit link to the socialist movement which, until the late 1980s was widely taken as the major alternative to capitalism. Consequently, marxism may be convicted of ignoring the dictum of disinterestedness, regardless of the best efforts of "scientific" marxism, which has always been identified with what was once derisively termed "marxism of the chair", to assimilate to the dominant positivistic traditions of economics and sociology (Wright, 1986).

We are told Parsons planned and actually wrote a chapter on Simmel but finally decided not to include it in *Structure*. Indeed, in this work there are only three separate references to Simmel: a footnote to, perhaps, Simmel's best known work *Sociologie* (Simmel, 1908) which forms the basis for several collections in translation of his essays, but in its entirety remains untranslated to the present date; a passing reference to Simmel's idea that analytic elements "draw a line through the facts;" (Parsons 1949, p. 748) and a one paragraph critique of Simmel's attempt to establish sociology as the "only abstract analytic science in the social field" a conclusion which Parsons rejected (Parsons 1949, pp. 772–773). Since

Parsons devotes the entire first section of his book to political economy and, under the influence of a particular interpretation of Freud, later tried to integrate psychology into sociology it may be assumed that, notwithstanding Simmel's own substantial contributions, for example, to a social psychology of urban life, Simmel's claim for sociology as a master discipline would not fit into Parsons' orientation (Parsons 1949, p. 772).

Given Parsons's theoretical orientation we can draw fairly solid inferences that help explain why he decided to omit Simmel from the canon and instead to treat him as a marginal figure. First, Simmel's inability-or refusal-to develop a systematic theory of social action; his essayistic and deliberately un-scholarly style that corresponds to the way Simmel sees the modern world—as a series of fragments (Frisby 1986);—and, even more egregiously, he ignored the fundamental precondition for the development of a positive science, a rigorous methodology for sociological inquiry. But, there is another, even more fundamental characteristic of Simmel's thought that might account for his relative neglect by American sociology. Here is only one of Simmel's notorious statements about “methodology”:

Every area of research has two boundaries marking the point at which the process of reflection ceases to be exact and takes on a philosophical character. The precondition for cognition in general, like the axioms of every specific domain, cannot be presented and tested within the latter domain, but rather they call for a science of a more fundamental nature. The goal of this science, which is located in infinity, is to think without pre-conditions—a goal which the individual sciences deny themselves since they do not take any step without proof that is, without pre-conditions of a substantive and methodological nature (Simmel 1978 , p. 53).

For Simmel the start of the philosophy domain is on the lower boundary of the exact domain, but its upper boundary “lies at the point where the ever-fragmentary contents of positive knowledge seek to be augmented by definitive concepts into a world picture and to be related to the totality of life” (Simmel 1978, p. 53). Simmel understood sociology as positive knowledge and was, for this reason, subject to the limitations which apply to any science dedicated to examining a specific domain. It had no choice but to investigate the fragments, since social life does not present itself to cognition as a totality. However, as David Frisby has justly pointed out, Simmel had no doubt that every fragment that becomes the object of social knowledge contains the totality. (Frisby 1986). Thus, the totality is not, for Simmel, an aggregative concept. In contrast to the Parsonian prescription for the development of a “scientific” sociology, which entails limiting its domain to generating verifiable propositions on the basis of specific methodological presuppositions, the task of Simmel's “more fundamental” science is to extract the totality from the particular domains and social types that present themselves to investigation.

Simmel's call for a “science of a more fundamental nature” than positive inquiry violates one of the crucial markers of modern social science: that it emulate the putative anti-speculative nature of natural science (putative because despite its desire to make every proposition subject to strict empirical and mathematical “proof”, theoretical physics is rife with speculation, albeit couched in the language of positivism). Perhaps equally importantly, Simmel acknowledges a strong affinity between his own theory and historical materialism, a link that alone might have disqualified him from entering the positivist pantheon:

The attempt is made to construct a new story beneath historical materialism such that the explanatory value of the incorporation of economic life into the causes of intellectual culture is preserved, while the economic forms themselves are recognized as the result of more profound valuations and currents of psychological and even metaphysical pre-conditions. For the practice of cognition this must develop in infinite reciprocity. Every interpretation of an ideal structure by means of an economic structure must lead to the demand that the latter in turn be understood from more ideal depths, while for these depths themselves the general economic base has to be sought, and so on indefinitely. In such an alternation and entanglement of the conceptually opposed principles of cognition the unity of things, which seems intangible to our cognition but none the less establishes its coherence, becomes practical and vital for us (Simmel 1978, p. 56).

In this passage, Simmel makes clear the degree to which a unique and quite original conception of the dialectic infuses his approach to social inquiry. Most crucially, he accords a decisive “infinite reciprocity” between “psychological and *even* metaphysical pre-conditions”, and economic and social forms (structure). In short, “culture” which embraces intellectual culture such as art and philosophy as well as emotions, everyday practices and other “subjective” elements are no mere efflux of economic relations but are, themselves, determinative of these relations. And, as I will show below, a more satisfactory understanding of Simmel’s social theory *entails* a grasp of its philosophical elements. For it is Simmel’s most controversial contention and one that is, perhaps, the *sufficient condition* for his marginalization, that his work fits uneasily into the positivist framework of contemporary sociology, which presupposes the irrelevance of “metaphysics” to its deliberations.

Rather, consonant with his early and extremely favorable reception by the so-called Chicago school of which Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess, Albion Small (an early translator) and Louis Wirth were important figures, large portions of *Sociologie* and other essays that bore on urban problems; issues such as superordination and subordination; and the nature of human interaction were translated and published from the early 1890s through the first two decades of the 20th century in *The American Journal of Sociology* due, principally, to the untiring efforts of Small. Indeed, in their influential sociology textbook *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* which includes extracts from relevant texts by, among others, Charles Cooley, William Graham Sumner, Lester F. Ward, Emile Durkheim and John Dewey, Park and Burgess reproduce more work from Simmel than from any other. Moreover, there is ample evidence that, along with classical English political economy, he deeply influenced the Chicago school’s ecological approach to the City as a social phenomenon. Since, almost the entire sub-discipline or urban sociology is organized precisely in the way Simmel conceived modern society-his work has been appropriated piecemeal.

Even before Parsons’s extractive surgery from the body of sociological theory, Simmel appears not as a major theorist but in the prevailing division of sociological labor is pigeonholed as a great founder of urban and “micro” sociology. Neither Lewis Coser and Donald Levine’s determined efforts to call attention to Simmel’s larger significance for the development of sociology in the 1950s, 1960’s and 1970s nor David Frisby’s more recent, and more detailed, renewal of the campaign have had, as yet, much impact on the theoretical orientation of most of the discipline.

To be sure, there is much talk of a Simmel “revival” in the secondary literature and the

recent translations of two of Simmel's major works, *The Philosophy of Money* and *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* are encouraging. Indeed, in both cases the translators have provided extensive commentaries on both the works and on Simmel's fundamental contributions to sociology and philosophy. Frisby's essay traces Simmel's place in late 19th century social thought, principally neo-kantian historicism and marxism (Frisby, 1978). Although Helmut Loiskandl, Deena Weinstein and Michael Weinstein are political scientists and sociologists, they have translated a philosophical work from what they term Simmel's "middle" period (1900–1910) when he is working out his *lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life). According to the translators, Simmel's method of analysis is nothing less than one we would describe today as deconstructionist. He "sets up antinomies" in order to reveal the holes in the tacit as well as explicit assumptions of these thinkers (Simmel 1986, p. vii).

In contrast, Frisby's treats Simmel as a highly unconventional sociological pioneer and adroitly situates his thought within the neo-kantian German historicism of the late 19th century and as a powerful influence on Lukacs' "western" marxism, as well as within the developing discipline of sociology in the same period. Although in his Simmel essays as well as his collective study of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin he identifies his own thought with these distinctly anti-positivist speculative thinkers, Frisby presupposes a major premise of positivism insofar as he is content to show the significance of Simmel's work for social theory and implicitly accepts the distinction between philosophy and social science (Frisby 1986; Frisby 1992). His essays on Simmel's social theory, as well as his superb introduction(s) to *The Philosophy of Money* ignore discussions of his life-philosophy which appears only in a brief discussion of the aesthetic dimension of Simmel's theory.

Thus, it is not surprising that the essays which, to some extent, have permeated the canon ("Metropolis and Mental Life" "The Stranger" and "The Adventurer") illustrate the narrow framework within which Simmel is read (Simmel, 1950). Take, for example, the most typical reading of "Metropolis.." which is one of Simmel's most anthologized and assigned essays. In this essay whose writing stands between the great *Philosophy of Money* (1900) and the equally fecund *Sociologie* (1908) Simmel examines the "attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life." For Simmel, the "deepest problems of modern life" are associated with "the resistance of the individual to being levelled, swallowed up in the social-technological mechanism" (Simmel 1950, p. 409).

From this general outline, Simmel goes on to discuss the adaptation of the personality to the crucial changes represented by urbanism, most notably the results of the overwhelming weight of what he calls the "money economy", the explication of which forms the heart of *The Philosophy of Money*. For Simmel modern social life is synonymous with the moment when exchange relations become the dominant social *fact* of metropolitan life. Among the distinguishing features of this economy is its close affinity to the intellect: the pure "matter of factness" with which both treat persons and things; their reduction of relations between persons to relations between things; their common tendency to reduce quality to quantity in which persons are treated as numbers and of interest insofar as they are "objectively perceivable" (Simmel 1968, p. 326).

The dominant reading treats "Metropolis.." as a work of social psychology of urbanism. Students learn that what Simmel calls the characteristic urban "blase" attitude is

nothing other than a form of resistance to these objectifying relationships. The individual adopts the blasé attitude in her attempt to resist the battering of the stimuli of urban life—especially the pace of existence—by separating the inner and outer self. At first shaken by the sheer power of the external environment the individual, in time, learns to love some of its major features. In contrast to rural life which is marked by the merger of social and emotional relationships (where the money economy and its partner the intellect has not [yet] taken a dominant position) we learn to value objectivity and particularly the anonymity of daily existence. Where, in the small town, everybody knows the most intimate details of our lives, the very idea of “neighborhood” is virtually a contradiction in terms in the urban context. The city, the most public of social worlds, paradoxically fosters extreme privacy.

Thus, while Marx, Weber and Durkheim speak of the disabling effects of estrangement, Simmel gives us an ambivalent picture: reification and alienation are outcomes of the growing objectification of social life but are rational responses to an otherwise jolting situation. Like his contemporary, George Herbert Mead, Simmel understands the social self as the product of the multiplicity of relationships in which it enters (Mead, 1934). What influenced the Chicago school in Simmel’s formulation of the relation of the individual to the urban scene was precisely what marked one of Mead’s fundamental contributions to its sociology: the interactive relation of the social self to its environment through the category of *role*. But, unlike Mead’s later followers of the “symbolic interactionism” school, Simmel does not abandon the notion of the existence of an inner self which resists being taken over by the environment. Nor, in the tendency already present in Park’s work on communications, does Simmel surrender notions of substance to those of form (signs).

However, if we place this essay in the context of the totality of Simmel’s work, it may be seen as an instantiation of one of his favorite ways of theorizing: to show the totality in the emergence of a social type resulting from a broad historical movement. The “metropolitan” type arises from the dominance of money as *the* form of life of modernity. But, in the essay, Simmel disposes, in less than a page, of a specification of the pre-condition of the new urban personality—the money economy, particularly its tendency toward reification and objectification of all human relationships. Moreover, the all-important connection between the intellect and commodity exchange, which receives extensive treatment in *The Philosophy of Money* is summarized but not fully explicated.

In his *History and Class Consciousness* Georg Lukacs appropriates Simmel’s conception of reification to explain the non-correspondence between the actual, empirical consciousness of the proletariat which, on the level of everyday life, is mired in the thing-like relations of commodity exchange and the revolutionary consciousness ascribed to it by marxist theory. Lukacs argues that revolutionary consciousness *may* occur only at the moment of economic and political crisis, but is in no way inevitable (Lukacs 1967). Lukacs’ celebrated distinction between empirical and imputed class consciousness has, in the absence of a detailed analysis of Simmel’s own use of this conception, dominated our understanding of reification. However, Simmel’s demonstration of the relation between the intellect and the money economy is more than an analogy. Rather, he argues that the intellect—scientific, business and political—which values objectivity, law, and quantitative measurement is intertwined with, and in reciprocal relation to, the development of the money economy. Perhaps more to the point, what unites these two domains is their penchant for the process of *abstraction*:

Money represents the moment of objectivity, in exchange activities as it were, in pure isolation and independent embodiment since it is free of all the specific qualities of the individual things exchanged and thus *per se* has no biased relationship to any subjective economic element. Similarly, theoretical laws represent the independent objectivity of nature, in relation to which every individual case appears to be accidental—the counterpart to the subjectivity of man (Simmel 1978, p. 436).

Just as the demand for objectivity in science demands that objects be compared according to the common quantitative denominators of weight, motion and units of heat/energy which remains indifferent to their unique qualities, so the particular characteristics and uses of a given commodity are laid aside for the purposes of exchange. What matters is that somebody wants the product, but her/his motives for this desire are of no interest to the purveyor.

Lukacs' appropriation of the theory of reification for solving one of the most vexing problems of marxist theory, why the working class did not intervene to overturn capitalism at the moment of its deepest and most global crisis?, obscured the correlative issue which Simmel addressed that has proven to be, in the large historical sense, equally significant. Simmel's argument that the modern intellect is ineluctably tied to the commodity form by the common denominator of their indifference to "all specific qualities of . . . individual things" and by their representation of the "independent objectivity" of nature and its human equivalent, the marketplace, point to a glaring contradiction in revolutionary marxism and other movements that claim the mantle of the enlightenment, their reliance on scientific law and its bearers, to break the grip of a system built on the fusion of the scientific intellect and the money economy. In the most technologically advanced societies where abstract knowledge has become the chief productive force its bearer, the intellectuals, increasingly occupy positions of economic and political power. Reformulating Lukacs phrase, as "the commodity form penetrates all corners of the social world", subjectivity is driven deeper into the inner recesses of the soul and has no public existence. Hence the emotions are cut off from the intellect, and can only be represented paradoxically. The young Lukacs, having earlier assimilated on a personal as well as intellectual plane Simmel's *lebensphilosophie* recognized the contradiction between "life" or what, in literary terms, he calls "soul" and the necessary "forms" that embody it (Lukacs 1971). On his way to marxism where the issues are framed more "scientifically", the younger Lukacs insisted that that the spiritual crisis of modernity could be understood as the struggle of life against the forms that have come into existence in the scientific age:

There is never any room for life in a logical system of thought; seen in this way, the starting point for such a system is always arbitrary and, from the perspective of life, only relative, a mere possibility. There is no system in life. In life there is always the separate and individual, the concrete. To exist is to be different. And only the concrete, the individual phenomenon is unambiguous (Lukacs 1971, p. 26).

In this passage, the distinction between Lukacs' own view and that of his protagonist, Kierkegaard remains somewhat blurred, but it is clear that the problematic of modern life that Simmel had already named is, for Lukacs, that the abstract forms given to us in logical systems of thought crowd out everything but the *possibility* of life. Although in this earlier essay, Lukacs' project is to imagine the forms that can be in harmony with life, he remains sceptical of the modern world of industrialization, science and urbanism.

These essays, written in the first decade of the 20th century, from the perspective of an intellectual living in a country (Hungary) which is on the brink of its never fully realized capitalist development, refuses the nostalgia of a mythic, or bygone age, but is unable to fully embrace its determinate negation, capitalist modernity. Did Lukacs' final embrace of bolshevism, even if not unreservedly reflect, as it did for his mentor, Simmel, the agony of the intellectual not fully committed to modernity but also unable to deny its triumph?

Simmel and Lukacs are joined by yet another metaphysical unity: both are repelled by the prospect of formlessness that might issue from the overflowing of life: "to achieve form is to achieve the greatest possible fulfillment" even if this fulfillment is inevitably transitory. Thus, while much of contemporary sociology considers conflict an exceptional event to be resolved by formal reconciliation, for Simmel and Lukacs "becoming" and its presupposition, "dissonance," is the essence of life (Lukacs 1971, p. 102). The dissonance is the inevitable contradiction between life that has overflowed the forms that arose to enable its unfolding. Here, we can see how much Simmel, Lukacs and the marxist tradition to which they have elective affinity, owe to evolutionary thought, that of Hegel as much as to Darwin. The idea that form has historicity opposes the powerful residue of platonism which has been evolutionism's major antagonist in western philosophy. But, as we shall see, unlike marxism for which change is the only constant of being, the power of the money economy to freeze life within form prefigured the chance that history had come to an end or that it would generate unintended consequences for the relation of life and form.

### MONEY ECONOMY AS A FORM OF LIFE

Simmel's intellectual restlessness and pedagogic acuity rarely permitted him to undertake sustained theoretical discourse without providing narratives from everyday life, philosophy, religion and, especially, art. But these brief narratives are not merely illustrative of already pre-formed ideas. Reading Simmel, one is aware that he is working out his positions in and through the forms; his descriptions and discussions of what he calls social types do not have the lifeless quality of predigested material. Which is what gives them their apparently fragmentary, unsystematic feeling. In this section, I offer my own pedagogic intervention to show one of Simmel's most characteristic and incredibly rich themes: how the money economy becomes a form of life such that life itself seems no longer to flow outside its framework. Faithfully, I work with one of our most ubiquitous art-forms, film.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s two of the more profitable Hollywood movie genres were the films of obsessive "love" and films concerning the obsessive love of money. Their common denominator—the lust to possess the desired object at all costs—commends the judgement that they may be considered two variants of the same fundamental tendency in contemporary life: money and its displacements is transformed from a medium of exchange into an end in itself.

In *Fatal Attraction*, the blockbuster that established the subgenre of obsessive love the female protagonist carries her untrammelled desire to the point of death; its male object is, in most respects, beyond cognition. He is mainly known to us by the overwhelming fact of being pursued. What matters to the pursuer, the Glenn Close character, is to *have* him and the question of what the basis for the attraction, beyond the value of possession itself, is

simply never raised. In a somewhat different register, the female anti-heroine of *Basic Instinct* violates the code that only men can separate love from sex; in terms of the prevailing sexual culture, she *is* a man whether having conjugal relations with a woman or a man. She instrumentalizes her love-objects to serve her own literary and sexual purposes. In effect, they are commodities. Her experiences with them are subordinate to their function as "data" for her latest novel. When the novel is completed she drops them.

These films, for their portrayal of ruthless, pitiless and even predatory women, can be read as part of the anti-feminist backlash of the 1980s, as misogyny. But, the assumption behind this characterization is the essential "natural" difference between women and men. Nobody flinches at the image of men as aggressive opportunists moneygrubbers as are the Michael Douglas and Charlie Sheen characters in Oliver Stone's populist film *Wall Street*. Despite Stone's fulminations, our tacit understanding is that the money economy generates the destructive character and that this not only comes with the territory, it may be necessary to survive in it.

What are we to make of the reversals depicted in *Fatal Attraction*, *Basic Instinct*, let alone the scenes in *Thelma and Louise*, in which the Geena Davis character shoots her rapist-adversary or the more shocking destruction of a truck by Davis and her partner the Susan Sarandon character, after the driver sexually harasses them? I want to suggest that one of the major debates within American feminism in the 1980s and 1990s is between those who would liberate women from male violence on the basis of the putative recognition of their ineluctable *difference* with respect to men and those for whom freedom consists, precisely, in women's ability to share all of the privileges and deformations that come with participation in the money economy. What the protagonists of these films know is that desire is the cutting edge of male privilege and to be desired is the clawing characteristic of feminine bondage. These women hold up a mirror to male culture in ways that we have not seen in screen representations since the films of Bette Davis, Barbara Stanwyck and Joan Crawford. But, whereas these earlier figures were imprisoned in the conventions of feminine behavior and were, for this reason, forced into duplicity in order to triumph over their male rivals, the "new" woman specifically disdains all but the most external trappings of these conventions and goes, instead for the juggular.

These films may provoke nostalgia for the old pseudo-chivalry of male chauvinism. For, while Lukacs may be right to state that "longing is always sentimental" and is always an attribute of loneliness, many might prefer the double whammy of the pedestal and slaving over a hot stove (under protection of the home) to the brutality of the labor market with its double shift and absence of emotional compensations. Still others want neither, but would opt for the best of both worlds: the financial independence that comes with well-paid labor and an emotional-sexual relationship built on a foundation of equality and companionship.

But everyday life is bounded by forms over which we have no control. Marriage may be liberating for the young woman straining at the leash of familial authority and romantic love is surely a form that for a breathless instant may catch life's flow without, at first, suffocating it. And, surely the Glenn Close character possesses enough desire to sustain many lives. But, the Davis and Sarandon characters know that the only way to be free is to leave their husband and lover respectively, if only for a vacation. At last, they come to the blinding recognition that going over the edge *together* beats any deal offered by the prevailing culture.

Which brings us to the Sharon Stone character. She is the quintessential success story of a social order that rewards those who remain free of the “specific qualities” of entangling and possessive relationships. She conspires with her female lovers against her male lovers. While she has sympathetic relationships with women she values men chiefly for the fucking but even more for the stories she can extrapolate from their lives. In contrast to *Close* whose unbridled and obsessive passion leads to her destruction, and to the Davis/Sarandon team that must die to preserve their autonomy, the writer, Stone, falls into the arms of her latest male lover, a detective. But not before Stone’s woman lover and a jealous former lover of both the detective and the writer are killed during unsuccessful attempts to murder the male lover. Stone’s final capitulation to the intimation of an impending marriage and family life simply forces closure to one of the more subversive Hollywood films in decades. For not only is the writer utterly autonomous, a state of being that presupposes a dedication to the fluidity of forms, but it is consistent with her apparent joyous bisexuality. She “enjoys” fucking men, but women are her real buddies, one of which, played by Dorothy Malone, has murdered her husband and children.

Money plays a crucial and destructive part in the screen adaptations of Arthur Miller’s 1940s dramas about the disintegration of the middle class family. In these narratives, Miller has accurately named World War Two as a crucial turning point in US history. It marks the triumph of the money economy over all anterior human relationships. In the case of *All My Sons*, under pressure of government-imposed deadlines, a small war contractor, played by Edward G. Robinson, sanctions the delivery of inferior goods that might have led to the loss of lives for American soldiers, including his own son. The fraud discovered, Joe, the contractor, pins the “mistake” on his partner and old family friend who is sent to jail to pay for Joe’s indiscretion. When the deed has been discovered by his younger son, Joe protests that everything he has done in business was for his family, especially the children. The family, not war profiteering, was the motivation for his tragic calamity. Nevertheless, as in a Greek tragedy by Euripides, Joe is impelled by the logic of the situation to betray his friend and risk the lives of soldiers.

In this narrative is it not a case of the simple conflict between business and personal values. For Joe revels in the security and conviviality of his private sphere, which includes his friends as much as his family. His betrayal of his friend in order to promote the interests of his wife and sons repeats a fairly familiar theme. The twist—his unwitting betrayal of his own son by the betrayal of his own business ethic and personal friendship reveals the tragic flaw in his character.

This thread is taken up again in the second of Miller’s major successes of this period, *Death of a Salesman*. As he grows older and less productive to his company Willy Loman, the traveling salesman, is dumped in favor of a younger man. The old culture of the community of salesmen is replaced by ruthless individualism where the bottom line is all that counts. Willy Loman’s world—his friendships and family life—cannot survive the change. He recognizes his own redundancy and, in the end, resolves his despair by taking his own life—the only dignified response to the passing of a world in which commodity exchange was mediated by the certain countervailing ethic of peer and family relationships that were held separate from the degradations associated with business.

But, Willy is by no means straightforwardly cast in the role of victim. As with many lonely travelers, he has affairs with other women and is, in his prime, a fiercely proud and competitive man. The pleasures of the private sphere are, in any event, more ideal than

actual. He is imbued with the *ideology* of family and community, but his own practices are deeply flawed. Far from merely being cast off to make way for ruthless modernity, Willy is himself culpible in his own demise.

Miller knows the triumph of the money economy sweeps away even the possibility of the non-commodified relationships and, insofar as they are expressed as “family values”, honesty, and comradery we are asked to mourn their passing. Whereas, a hundred years earlier, in *Moby Dick*, *Billy Budd*, and especially *Bartleby the Scrivener*, Herman Melville discerned the brutal destruction of traditional yeoman and bourgeois culture in the wake of the rise of the corporation, Miller’s chronicles the pathos of the passing of the vestiges of the small town middle class. What makes his characters pathetic is their naive faith in the family and intimate relationships whose decline is immanent in the penetration of the commodity form to “all corners of the social world.” but also bankruptcy of the the premise that community can survive the closing of the last frontier of individuality. That Joe, the war contractor, believed he could preserve the integrity of family values by separating them from the business imperative and Loman, the salesman upholds personal relationships when his viability as an employee depends, in the last instance, not only on the cash value of what he sells but on his comparative performance with respect to his fellow salespeople, his friends, reveals the utter collapse, except ideologically, of the middle class attempt to separate the private from the public.

Of course, financial greed and obsessive love are not new themes for the movies. It may be argued that detective films and a large portion of the *noir* canon have to do with the way in which money and sexual attraction are fatally entwined. The narrative of *Double Indemnity* for example, is constituted by a woman’s sexual manipulation of an insurance salesman for the purpose of enlisting him in a conspiracy to murder her husband so that she can collect a large life insurance benefit. In this classic noir film the denouement consists in the revelation that love and sexual passion are instruments of greed. Here, the woman, played brilliantly by Barbara Stanwyck, is obliged to resort to the duplicity of love in order to enlist an accomplice. But, however familiar, such subordination remained, in the 1940s something of a scandal. For, the romantic ethos of the era and the narratives that were constructed on it proclaimed exactly the reverse: love’s overriding status in the pantheon of human emotions. What gave the film its enduring power is the adroit play upon these transhistorical passions of love and greed. Seriously wounded by his lover after participating in the murder of his lover’s husband the salesman achieves redemption by turning himself in, not for the sake of law but for the reward of being recognized for having remained faithful to the contrary ethical precept of loyalty to the company.

A generation later, the salesmen of *Glengarry, Glenross* (1992) have entirely lost the private, even as a referent. Sexual passion and male friendship have been drained by the relentless drive, not merely for success, but for survival. All culture has been collapsed into the business of making money through selling investment real estate. David Mamet’s characters are suffering the depths of a terrible slump in their sales performance. The company sends down a hotshot younger salesman who threatens them with dismissal unless they deliver closed deals. Terrified, but also energized the most aggressive of them resort to theft and deception—against their clients as well as their employer—in order to stay afloat. Their lives are suffused with a single value: “closing” deals, regardless of the fraud that might be entailed by successful fulfillment. And, despite single-minded concentration, none is able to measure up without experiencing the utter futility of their efforts as

the deals fall apart. In Mamet's own film adaptation of his play, only a single character resists being transformed into a money machine. He is an older man who, suffused with ambivalence borne of guilt, finds himself unable to "close" yet is inevitably caught up in the scandal that is triggered by a fellow salesman's desperate attempt to avoid failure by stealing the company's premium sales leads.

Here we can observe the outcome of the long process in the evolution of money. Simmel's description shows that money comes of age when:

exchange has become something other than a private process between two individuals which is confined to individual actions. This new and broader character of exchange is established when the value of exchange given by one party has no direct value for the other party, but merely a claim upon other definite values; a claim whose realization depends upon the economic community as a whole or upon the government as its representative (Simmel 1978, p. 177).

But, extending Marx's point that the exchange of money for commodities is a fetishized form of the "real" relations between people, Simmel draws a similar conclusion:

...in the last analysis, it is not the objects but the people who carry on these processes [exchange relationships] and the relations between the processes are really the relations between people. The activity of exchange among individuals is represented by money in a concrete, independent and, as it were, congealed form, in the same sense as the government represents the reciprocal self-regulation of the members of a community, as the palladium or the ark of the covenant represents the cohesion of the group, or the military order represents its self-defence. All these are instances of a general type, in which a specific feature becomes detached from the primary phenomenon, substances or events to which it was bound in the same way that a quality is bound to its substance or action to the subject (Simmel 1978, p. 176).

Simmel's liberal use of analogy should not obscure the degree to which these sentences may be read as gloss on the fourth section of the first chapter of Marx's *Capital* on the fetishism of commodities (Marx 1971). However, where Marx, following the tradition of classical political economy named the task of social theory to penetrate the appearances of the market to reveal the underlying social relationships between labor and capital that are hidden as commodity exchanges, Simmel discovers that money is constitutive of the economy and itself becomes a form of life. *The Philosophy of Money* may be read as a narrative of how money transcends its instrumental character and takes on a life of its own:

This feature then assumes a structure of its own and the process of abstraction is brought to a conclusion when it crystallizes in a concrete formation. Outside exchange, money has as little meaning as have regiments and flags outside the needs of a communal attack and defence, or have priests and temples independently of communal religiosity. *The dual nature of money, as a concrete and valued substance and, at the same time, as something that owes its significance to the complete dissolution of substance into motion and function, derives from the fact that money is the reification of exchange among people, the embodiment of a pure function.* (Simmel 1978, p. 176 emphasis mine) and again:

The money economy enforces the necessity of continuous mathematical operations

in our daily transactions. The lives of many people are absorbed by such evaluating, weighing, calculating and reducing of qualitative values to quantitative ones. Gauging values in terms of money has taught us to determine and specify values down to the last farthing and has thus enforced a much greater precision in the comparison of various contents of life (Simmel 1978, p. 444).

Simmel's analysis incorporates Marx's insistence upon the historicity of all social forms. But, when he systematically follows exchange from its Crusoe-like character to the process of abstraction from which issues its generalized existence and, finally to the nature of money as the representative of all relations and the measure of all values, Simmel's analysis moves from its purely economic significance to money as the essence of the transvaluation of values of which Nietzsche spoke. Although money is an ancient form, it changes with the transformed character of the new economic relations that it embodies. As commodity exchange loses its local character with the emergence of world trade, industrial production, and urbanization, money whose external appearance is little changed, takes on a new significance. For Simmel, money signifies a new culture, and a new style of life.

Among the elements of the money-driven life style are: the rise of egoism and individualism which, together with the universality of intellectuality "brings about an atomization of society". At the same time, Simmel reflects on the ambiguous nature of the objectivity of intellectual knowledge. In contrast to earlier times when theoretical knowledge was held by the elites, it is now "available to everybody." Yet, Simmel argues that intellectual knowledge, which depends for its growth on "the communistic character of its quality" (an observation that Merton appropriated as the basis of his sociology of science), tends to be held as private property, just like any other commodity. Thus, although a large segment of the working class has gained considerable material comfort in advanced capitalist societies, the distinction between even the meanest formal intelligence and the proletariat has never been wider. Here, Simmel alters the familiar slogan "knowledge is power" to "knowledge is property" and as scientific and technological knowledge becomes an important commodity, it tends to merge with the money economy.

Needless to say, this observation could have been written yesterday.

#### RELATION BETWEEN "LIFE" AND "FORM"

But, there is a philosophical, even metaphysical layer beneath this description. Throughout his work Simmel's fundamental preoccupation is with the relation between "life" and "form": "Whenever Life progresses beyond the animal level to that of the spirit and spirit progresses to the level of culture, an internal contradiction appears. *The whole history of culture is the working out of this contradiction* (Simmel 1968, p. 375, emphasis mine). life..can manifest itself only in particular forms; yet owing to its essential restlessness, life constantly struggles against its own products, which have become fixed and do not move along with it." Thus, there is a "deep contradiction between life's eternal flux and the objective validity and authenticity of the forms through which it proceeds" (Simmel 1968, p. 376). Simmel gives the classic example of the forces and relations of production: the conflict between new economic forces (life) and the old modes of production (forms) throughout history.

We are familiar with the traditional distinction between form and content in discussions

of art and aesthetics. Although for Simmel life is “content”, its meaning cannot be confined within that relatively static category. Life connotes the process of incessant change which can only be channeled by form, but not entirely embodied. Thus, not only culture but history may be understood as the conflict between life and the forms it has brought into existence. In the case of the money economy, moral norms and religion, the forms tend to resist the inevitable overflow of life and, as Marx already had noted, constitute a fetter on life (the new productive forces). But, whereas Marx held this resistance of the old forms of production to be, sooner or later, the basis of revolutionary transformation in the structure of the whole society, Simmel remained sceptical about the inevitable collapse of the old forms, especially with respect to the cultural power of the money economy. Having been created by Life as a form that facilitates the exchange of goods across local boundaries into ever wider circles, at a certain point, money loses its purely economic function as an instrument. It takes on an existence that incorporates its earlier economic function, but is no longer confined to it. For Simmel, the development of the money economy in the 19th and early 20th centuries marked the emergence of money as a source of cultural creation. To the extent that the money economy becomes a new “style of life” that is, when money measures not only economic value but the whole of human values—its displacement becomes improbable, if not impossible. As a result, the period that witnesses the triumph of the money economy over culture is marked by the appearance of new movements in art and politics, on behalf of the new forces of life which, perhaps for the first time, call into question not merely the old forms but the efficacy of form itself.

According to Simmel, the early 20th century marks a new and unexpected phase in this process, “no longer a struggle of a contemporary form, filled with life, against the old lifeless one, but a struggle of life against the form *as such* against the principle of form” (Simmel 1968, p. 377). Simmel’s examples, as is his wont are, in the first place drawn from art. Written in the year of the start of the Great War, 1914, he interprets the rise of futurism and “completely abstract art among some sectors of the youth” as signs that the old forms are incapable of accomodating “an immediate and unrestrained expression of the self” (Simmel 1968, p. 384) A second example is the “recent philosophical movement” pragmatism which, according to Simmel attacks the “independence of truth” from practical affairs which is the hallmark of all traditional philosophy (p. 384) The demand that all cognition, including philosophy be inextricably linked to life constitutes a fundamental violation of the tradition according to which philosophy’s independence is a condition of its ability to guide life.

Simmel’s third illustration is, perhaps, the most relevant for current cultural and political debates. It is the challenge to existing sexual morality which, at the time, claimed that “the most personal and intimate meaning of erotic life is destroyed by the forms in which our culture has reified and trapped it” namely, marriage and prostitution. Simmel endorses the complaint, but accuses the “small group” of reformers and their more substantial followers of failing to find new forms that can more adequately express erotic flows. In this discussion, we can see most clearly Simmel’s own position. The overflow of life of the old forms must bring into existence new forms. In the case of erotic life, they require individual channels, otherwise the “natural” process will remain impeded.

In this rumination, as well as his earlier comments on methodology Simmel’s description, as opposed to his own position which, in the end remained ambivalent, prefigures contemporary postmodernism’s denial of foundationalism in philosophy and science. On

the one hand, together with other intellectuals of the period, especially the young Lukacs, he bears agonized witness to the destruction of spirit (in Lukacs' phrase "soul") in the wake of the degradations of modern technology and cultural commodification. On the other hand, true to his debt to Kant as well as Marx, Simmel firmly rejects the attack against the very principle of form as a formula for utter chaos.

For Simmel the acquisition of human knowledge, including the products of sociological inquiry is, as much as art, a crucial activity of producing life-forms. "Grasping" life aesthetically and intellectually are no mere contemplative activities but, instead, create culture. In turn, culture is not merely the repository of life, but itself becomes life that creates its own forms. Thus, without culture which implies the creation of significations or meanings through language and other practices, the new is in danger of being dispersed. So, even if the old forms resist and constrain the new historically-generated content, Simmel insists that the revolt against form per se destroys culture.

Of course, Simmel's essay "The Conflict of Modern Culture" (Simmel 1968) is at once a restatement of his perennial theme of the contradiction between life and form, and a theory of the artistic avant garde which, as money definitively establishes its specific cultural identity in the 18th and 19th centuries, almost invariably revolts against form and an expression at the level of criticism a prefiguration of the profound political challenge to world capitalism that was on the horizon. Whereas, Lukacs, Ernst Bloch and others who sat just a few years earlier at Weber and Simmel's feet on Sunday afternoons in Berlin opened their hearts and minds to the new revolutionary currents and saw the fulfillment of the new Life in the Bolshevik forms, Simmel's tragic imagination which was anything but utopic, held him back. Despite his own insistence that history *is* the working out of the contradiction between life and form like many liberal intellectuals, including his friend Weber, he could only see the chaos immanent in a revolution that appeared to be directed against form itself.

As early as 1907, in his account of Nietzsche's philosophy, we can see Simmel's defense of form. After discussing Nietzsche's discovery that "values in the life of humanity . . . are independent of social formation" and reside only in individuals Simmel enters his critique:

. . . (Nietzsche) liberates human values and interests from the limitations and determinations imposed by social forms of relation and, perhaps, in so doing he underestimates the importance of social formation even for the development of individual values. The only definitive values in humanity are individuals, yet societies are so self sufficient that from a socio-ethical viewpoint one could claim that the individual, like the atom, is but a fiction (Simmel 1986, p. 145).

From which follows Simmel's immanent critique of Nietzsche's "dogmatic" rant against social forms. Simmel shows that Nietzsche's defense of the individual as the repository of life is a powerful "ethical" concept from which to mount an attack on intellectual and social decadence, but has little social or historical validity. Here, against Nietzsche's glorification of the extraordinary individual against the levelling tendencies of liberal, democratic societies, Simmel defends a democratic standpoint based upon a reading of the broad scale tendency of evolution to narrow human differences. While, in his "middle period" Simmel hesitates to defend modern social formations entirely on the ground of their place in the human evolution, he nevertheless places his own moral

perspective remains that the “is” of social formation is tending toward the “ought” of democratic equality.

In the final accounting, as Simmel himself tells us, philosophy is the most acute expression of the self. As we have seen, in his “third” and last period, Simmel thought there was reason to fear the consequences of life’s untrammelled flows. One might read the last essays as a conservative recoiling from the flood and a desperate search for dry ground, which Simmel found in the safety of social and artistic forms. Thus, although Simmel’s philosophy of life owes much to Spinoza’s concept of immanence in which substance and forms stand in a determinate relationship, he is unable to posit their ultimate harmony. In “The Conflict in Modern Culture” Simmel is even more insistent that the contradiction between life and form is as irreconcilable as is the reality of war and the desire for absolute peace. Moreover, his sceptical account of the “transcendence of life” calls into question his earlier philosophical/historical perspective which, as Rudolph Weingartner points out, owes as much to Hegel as to Darwin (Weingartner 1960).

The recent outpouring of translations of Simmel’s philosophical works demonstrate that it is impossible to grasp the sociology without understanding its place in his wider theoretical “system”. Of course, as in Marx’s case, this quest places a burden on the American reader which is in conflict with her/his education. For positivism has not only defined US social science; it has determined the shape of cultural and intellectual formation. The new interest in Simmel among Anglo-American readers may be understood in terms of the current fascination with postmodernism or, more accurately, with the disturbing modernist concepts such as uncertainty and indeterminacy; the scepticism which greets many social-scientific attempts to emulate natural science; the haste of contemporary discourse to escape the chains of the past; and, perhaps most saliently, the will to intellectual playfulness of which Simmel is an exemplary figure. When we reconsider the *tendency* of Simmel’s effort to comprehend the ambiguities of modernity it is, despite his own trepidations, to value life over form, to really grapple with the new. Simmel’s risk-taking is an unsettling characteristic noticeably and regrettably absent from most contemporary social science.

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