

6

Social space, the city and the metropolis

In any case, we moved house again on April 1st—I believe because the landlord wanted to raise the rent.

Hans Simmel

It is hardly possible to treat of the mental life of the metropolis in a sparser and more biased way than he [Simmel] did in his lecture of that title at the Gehe Foundation in Dresden.

Dietrich Schaefer

I

It has been the fate of many of Simmel's essays to lead a life of their own, far away from their original context. At the same time, other essays treating similar themes are often either not dealt with at all or are examined in completely different constellations. The present investigation seeks to bring together three complexes of work that are usually seen in isolation from one another. In some cases, they have hardly begun to be examined at all.

Simmel's contributions to a sociology of space have seldom been investigated in any detail, and have hardly ever been related to his more famous essay on the metropolis, despite the fact that the two essays which constitute his contribution to the *Soziologie* (1908) on 'The Sociology of Space' both appeared originally in 1903, the same year as the publication of 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (more accurately 'Metropolises and Mental Life').¹ The two essays dealing with social space were entitled 'On Spatial Projections of Social Forms'² and 'The Sociology of Space'.³ In turn, Simmel's essay on the metropolis—described by Louis Wirth in his bibliography for Park and Burgess's influential volume *The City* (1925) as 'the most important single article on the city from the sociological standpoint'⁴—has never been placed in the context of his other essays on cities, notably on Rome (1898),⁵ Florence (1906)⁶ and Venice (1907).⁷ These three essays present a very different conception of the city and emphasize in particular its aesthetic dimensions.

The best known of all these essays is, of course, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', often examined as a virtuoso piece of analysis. Many of its themes emerge out of *The Philosophy of Money* (1900)—especially the final chapter on 'The Style of Life'—and Simmel himself acknowledges this in his essay. The autonomous existence of the metropolis essay and the fact that Simmel spent most of his life in Berlin has also led to its obvious thematic identification with Berlin—and the only metropolis mentioned by Simmel in the essay is indeed Berlin, in the imaginary context of all its clocks telling different times. However, Simmel's first major essay which did not appear anonymously or under a pseudonym that explicitly names Berlin is his 'Berlin Trade Exhibition' (1896),⁸ an essay which also introduces some themes that are developed in the later piece. Here, too, mention should be made of 'Berlin Art Letter' (1896),⁹ which deals explicitly—though anonymously—with

the Berlin National Gallery. There are also a number of other essays which take Berlin as their starting point (as in 'Infelices Possidentes'¹⁰) and others which, although they do not always explicitly mention Berlin, can be regarded as relating to the metropolis. This is also true of Simmel's opening remarks in 'The Philosophy of Landscape' (1910)¹¹ on the possibility of the metropolis as a landscape.

II

Before proceeding to an examination of Simmel's analyses of social space, the city and the metropolis, it may be fruitful to indicate his own experience of them. Simmel was born in 1858 'in the house that formed the north-west side of the intersection of the Leipzigerstrasse and Friedrichstrasse. Then still to the west of the old city centre, these two streets were later to become the most characteristic and important commercial streets; one could not, as it were, be 'even more' of a local of Berlin than when one was born [there]'.¹² Simmel was born at what was to become the point of intersection of the social circles of consumption and circulation. At all events, he remained in Berlin until, at the age of fifty-six, he finally secured in 1914 a chair of philosophy at Strasbourg University, a move which he always regretted. Shortly before leaving Berlin for Strasbourg he wrote that his home would always be 'Berlin, Westend'.

Simmel spent the majority of his life in one of the fastest growing cities in Germany after 1870. He experienced the elevation of Berlin from a city to a metropolis—symbolically identified with the Berlin Exhibition of 1896. By the turn of the century, Berlin's population was two million inhabitants. It was then and continued to be one of the centres of migration from Eastern Europe and later from Russia. The University of Berlin was already attracting large numbers of students from both Central Europe and Russia, as well as from North America.

Simmel himself became a significant figure in intellectual and cultural circles, certainly after 1900. Earlier, he went without question to its university where, from 1885 until 1914 he taught philosophy, sociology, aesthetics and social psychology. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, his lectures were attracting hundreds of students, often to the chagrin of many of his colleagues. At the same time, Simmel was himself at the intersection of a variety of intellectual circles in Berlin in which philosophers, artists, poets, economists and students might interact. It is not yet known whether he was ever a member of a political party, but in the early 1890s at least he also moved in socialist circles, publishing in their journals and attending their social gatherings.

It is clear from the extent of Simmel's interaction in a variety of cultural and intellectual circles that he was completely at home in the cosmopolitan intellectual environment of the West end of Berlin. Unlike many of his contemporaries who were not enamoured with cities—such as Tönnies who hated Berlin—Simmel identified with the intellectual circles in which he circulated. And in contrast to many of his contemporaries, he displayed little interest in attempts to escape metropolitan existence permanently, to artistic and other communal retreats in the countryside; Worpswede or Sils Maria were not for Simmel. Instead, he was thoroughly at one with a cosmopolitan, metropolitan, intellectual existence. His cultural milieu would include the Stefan George circle, the artistic circle of Reinhold and Sabine Lepsius, Rilke, Max Liebermann, Henry van de Velde, Harry Graf Kessler, the

political circle around his sometime neighbour Ignaz Jastrow, self-created circles including his sometime favourite students, such as Georg Lukács, Ernst Bloch, Gertrud Kantorowicz, Margarete Susman, and so on.

Simmel's image of the metropolis is that of a web or network of intersecting spheres of the division of labour, distribution, communications, the money economy, commodity exchange, intellectual and cultural circles. What is largely absent from the image of the metropolis, viewed from its West end is its industrial dimension. What Simmel describes in his essay on the metropolis and elsewhere is the capital city, the focal point of the money economy, not the industrial city, which would have produced a very different conception of the metropolis. The capital city is the city of metropolitan culture, state bureaucracy and, in the case of Prussia, a substantial military presence, as well as its commercial interactions and social distractions. The Berlin of an expanding industrial economy, with often advanced industries, and with its industrial suburbs of Moabit and the like, is absent. It follows from this that what is also absent is a social class analysis of the metropolis, at least in the essay on the metropolis. Industrial conflict and the development of trades unions is present in other essays. In turn, what is also largely absent is the heavily contested public political space of the metropolis, which only receives occasional attention, for instance, in the essays on social space. An interesting exception is Simmel's extensive discussion of the emergent women's movement challenging the patriarchal domination of the public sphere.¹³

However, what makes Simmel's analysis of the metropolis so relevant to the study of modernity is its emphasis upon the sphere of circulation and exchange, not merely of money and commodities but also social groups and individuals, a dynamic intersection of social circles. This sphere of circulation and exchange is, however, a sphere in which value differences are often obscured, in which class divisions are rendered opaque and do not always immediately manifest themselves. Such a concentration might also make Simmel's discussion of the metropolis relevant to the delineation of postmodernity where, in some accounts, his essay is also referenced.

It should be emphasized here that under circulation should be subsumed not merely commodities but also individuals. Perhaps not untypically, Simmel himself circulated in Berlin as far as his residence was concerned. When his son Hans relates that 'we moved house again on April 1st', it was symptomatic of the Simmels' relatively frequent changes of residence. From Simmel's incomplete correspondence, we find the following addresses: Magdeburgerstrasse (1878); Landgrafenstrasse (1886); Kleiststrasse (1891); Lutherstrasse (1892); Wormserstrasse (1894); Lützowerplatz (1894); Hardenbergstrasse (1894); Lindenallee (1902); Nussbaumallee (1905); Königin-Elizabethstrasse (1911).

Also typical of Simmel's own circulation, and in keeping with the mores of the metropolitan bourgeois intelligentsia, was evidence of frequent travel, often abroad. Simmel's 'uncle' Julius Friedländer, between 1875 and 1887, was the owner of Schloss Königsegg on the island of Reichenau, Lake Constance, and the young Simmel spent many vacations there. Later, most summers and sometimes in the spring Simmel went to Switzerland or Italy. On at least one occasion, in 1898, he visited St Petersburg, and he made a number of trips to Paris (where he met Rodin), Prague, Vienna, and so on. Within Germany there were frequent visits to Heidelberg and the Max Weber family and their intellectual circle

as well as to Frankfurt and Munich. Around the turn of the century, according to his son Hans, Simmel

accepted ever more frequent invitations to give lectures in the most varied cities—single lectures or a series—sometimes in student circles, more often before a general audience. He greatly loved this activity of a ‘wandering priest’. He found it exciting; on the return journey he sometimes already worked on his next lecture. He often said that, ‘if one comes on a very short visit, whether one meets old friends or quite new people, they all seek to be very nice to one, they show one, as it were, their favourable side.’¹⁴

Simmel’s son’s memoirs contain a wealth of references to his father’s Berlin existence and some of his aphorisms. Still within the context of circulation, we find that one of the house removals was to the newer part of Berlin, Westend. Hans relates that,

In the real ‘old Westend’ we found nothing suitable, but rather had to move into one of the newly built streets adjacent to it, where we again lived ‘third floor’, but this time with a lift—even though still without electric light because of the high price of electricity! We had an extensive view from the balcony of the apartment and, in addition, a better connection to the city, since the subway was only two minutes away. Here it occurs to me that my father once related a dream that is so absolutely typical of him that it is worth writing down. He said, ‘I have dreamt that synthetic time has been discovered. At first, one could only produce it by the minute, just as one can also only produce artificial diamonds in very small crystals. Now, for instance, when one comes to the subway, and the train [Zug] wishes to depart at this very minute, then one takes one’s time box [Zeitzeug] out and strikes a time match [Zeitholz]—one gains a minute and can still catch the train’.¹⁵

This constellation of the new Westend, to the north west of the extended Kurfürstendamm, with the new underground railway stations, the interaction of time and space, provides a minor instance, a snapshot, of Simmel’s milieu.

Living in the relative security of Berlin’s Westend, Simmel was able to point to the need for metropolitan people to create a distance between their inner selves and the tumult of impressions with which the city dweller is confronted. On a number of occasions, Simmel draws attention to the social distance that is preserved on public transport systems, a largely absent interaction—apart from glances—with adjacent passengers, perhaps made more striking by the rapidity and confined space of underground carriages. In his essays on social space, rather than the more famous essay on the metropolis, Simmel mentions the social space between social classes, the boundaries of social interaction. In his own interactions, Simmel occasionally was confronted with the need to create a distance, most notably in the attempt to shoot the young Simmel in 1886 by a recalcitrant tenant of one of his uncle’s properties administered by Simmel. The tenant, being unable to pay rent arrears, ‘pulled out a revolver from the pocket of his overcoat and, from a *distance* of only one pace, fired a shot at Simmel which missed him and then fired two further shots at Simmel who had turned to flee. One bullet pierced the latter’s hat and grazed the head of the fleeing figure...’¹⁶ Here, and perhaps subsequently, Simmel was made aware of the acute need for distance and the dangers attached to a mature money economy when circulation and exchange break down.

III

In 1903 Simmel published two articles on the sociology of space: 'The Sociology of Space' and 'On the Spatial Projections of Social Forms'. This second essay was reviewed by Emile Durkheim in *L'année sociologique*.¹⁷ As was so often the case, Durkheim applauded Simmel's 'souplesse d'esprit' but, as was also not uncommon, castigated the lack of precision in his conceptualization. Indeed, Durkheim detected 'une élasticité excessive' in Simmel's use of concepts. As a cryptic conclusion to his review, Durkheim noted that the subject of the frontiers or borders between peoples discussed by Simmel had been dealt with more profoundly by the geographer Friedrich Ratzel in his *Politische Geographie*, 'which M. Simmel does not cite'.¹⁸ Be that as it may, the two essays were reworked into a substantial chapter of Simmel's major *Soziologie* (1908), as simply 'The Sociology of Space', but accompanied by three revealing appendices on 'The Social Boundary', 'The Sociology of the Senses' and 'The Stranger'. All three analyse various spatial dimensions of social interaction, and, more specifically, forms of social *distance*, all involving forms of social, physical and psychological *differentiation*. It should again be noted that Simmel's essay 'The Stranger' has led a quasi-autonomous existence, divorced in many of its interpretations from the original context in which it appeared.

The two original essays on the sociology of space do not deal exclusively with social space in the metropolis. Rather, only occasionally is the metropolis touched upon. None the less, it is possible to draw out their relevance for the metropolis. The same is also true of the three appendices on the social boundary, the senses and the stranger. In none of these cases is the metropolis a central focus of attention. Indeed, Simmel's sociology of space can be understood in a different context, as part of his incomplete study of the formal preconditions for human sociation that would include space but also time, mass, number, etc.

'The Sociology of Space' and 'On the Spatial projections of Social Forms' examine respectively 'the significance which the spatial preconditions of a sociation possess for its other determination and developments from a sociological perspective'¹⁹ and 'the effect which the spatial determinations of a group experience through its social forms and energies'.²⁰ Of the two essays, the first is probably of greater significance. The interaction of human beings is experienced as different ways of filling in space. Thus, Kant's definition of space as the possibility of being together (*Beisammkeit*) does not exclude other possibilities in human sociation. However, in order to examine the social preconditions for sociation more closely, Simmel concentrates attention upon some basic qualities—five in all—of spatial forms that are confronted in social interaction. These comprise the exclusiveness or uniqueness of space, the boundaries of space, the fixing of social forms in space, spatial proximity and distance and the movement of space. Hence, what Simmel wishes to demonstrate is that it is social interaction which makes what was previously empty and negative into something meaningful for us. Sociation fills in space.

Every part of space possesses an *exclusiveness* or uniqueness. Particular social formations may be identified with particular spaces, such as states or districts of cities, although in different ways. The interaction between individuals and groups in states is closely identified with a specifically demarcated territory, whereas the city's 'sphere of significance and influence' extends in various differentiated functional 'waves'—economic, cultural, political—into the hinterland. Indeed, within the city there has often been a functional rather than a quantitative filling out of space, as in the medieval city with its differentiated guilds or corporations.

Space possesses, too, the characteristic that it may be *broken into pieces* and subdivided for our purposes. In other words, it can be *framed in by boundaries*. Here Simmel specifically draws upon the analogy with the picture frame in so far as framing has a similar significance for social groups as for works of art. Spatial framing has a wider importance that Simmel does not draw out, namely in our constitution of social experience. None the less, he does indicate that a society, and forms of sociation, possess a sharply demarcated existential space in which the extensiveness of space coincides with the intensity of social relationships. This is in contrast to nature where the setting of boundaries appears arbitrary. The social boundary, however, constitutes a unique interaction in so far as each element affects the other by setting a boundary but without wishing to extend the effects to the other element. Hence, 'the boundary is not a spatial fact with sociological consequences but a sociological fact that is formed spatially'.

Therefore, the sociological boundary signifies a quite unique interaction, in which what is significant is the interactions woven on either side of the boundary. In contrast to forms of boundary maintenance, both political and social, Simmel draws out the relationship in the city between the impulsiveness of crowds in open spaces that gives them a sense of freedom and the tension of a crowd in an enclosed space. The indeterminacy of boundaries may also be seen in the spatial framework of darkness, in which the narrowness and breadth of the framework merge together to provide scope for fantasy—a not insignificant theme in the literary genres of the thriller and detective novel.

A third spatial feature in social formations is the capacity for *fixing or localizing of social interaction in space*. Here Simmel indicates four possibilities. First, the existence of a continuum from the completely local binding together of individuals (as in the medieval town) to a situation of complete freedom. Second, the fixing of a social form at a focal point, as in economic transactions (though Simmel points out that this derives not from the substantive immobility of a particular place but from the functions connected with the place). Third, the bringing together of otherwise independent elements around a particular space (the religious community's focus around the church). Here, Simmel draws attention to the rendezvous whose sociological significance 'lies, on the one hand, in the tension between the punctuality and fleeting nature of the occurrence, and its spatiotemporal fixing on the other'. The rendezvous also indicates that human memory is stronger on space than on time. Finally, the individualizing of place is a significant urban development (from the earlier naming of houses to their numbering and, in the Enlightenment period, occasionally the numbering and lettering of streets).

The relationships between *proximity and distance* constitute the fourth dimension of social space. It would be possible to grade all social interactions on a scale of proximity or distance. In the metropolis it is distance, abstraction and indifference to those who are spatially adjacent, as well as close relationships to the spatially distant that are typical. The latter is a product of intellectuality which makes possible proximity to what is most remote and 'cool and often alienated objectivity between the closest individuals'. It is at this point that Simmel introduces his excursus on the sociology of the senses in his *Soziologie*, on seeing as 'perhaps the most immediate and purest reciprocal relationship that exists', and on hearing and smell, which 'remains trapped, as it were, in the human subject'.

The final dimension of space that Simmel examines is the possibility of *changing locations*. Whole groups can move their spatial determinants as in nomadic societies, but so

also can individuals with particular functions (itinerant justices) or merely travellers (and here Simmel points to the temporary intimacy of interaction between travellers temporarily abstracted from their normal milieu). What Simmel does not draw attention to, but which was a marked feature of Berlin, is the substantial migration of groups to the metropolitan centre from the east. This fifth dimension is also the context in Simmel's *Soziologie* for his excursus on 'The Stranger' which opens with its spatial referent: 'If wandering, considered as a state of detachment from every given point in space, is the conceptual opposite of attachment to any point, then the sociological form of "the stranger" presents the synthesis, as it were, of both these properties...another indication that spatial relations are not only determining conditions of relationships among people, but are also symbolic of those relationships'.²¹

Simmel's 'On the Spatial Projections of Social Forms' examines the spatial effects and forms that emerge *through* the process of interaction itself. Here he highlights four typical spatial formations arising out of social forms themselves. These are, first, the structuring of space according to the principles of political and economic organization; second, local structure arising out of relationships of domination; third, fixed localities as the expression of social bonds (i.e. social units located in spatial forms such as the family, the club, the regiment and the trade union all have their 'house'); and, finally, empty space as the expression of neutrality, the 'no-man's land' of state borders and, more recently, of metropolitan areas.

In one of the few studies of social space in Simmel's work, Elizabeth Kornau²² points to the disparate nature of his material and conceptualization, but also to the general thesis contained within Simmel's analysis of 'a progressive historical development towards forms of social organization increasingly detached from space'.²³ More specifically, 'space as the basis of social organization (principle of locality) signifies a stage of development that emerges between particularistic (principle of affinity) and modern (money economy) techniques of organization and domination'.²⁴ The development of the mature money economy results in a progressive emancipation from space. Communication techniques (e.g. the telegraph in the nineteenth century) enable spatial differences to be overcome by time. Kornau suggests that in so far as Simmel's analysis indicates the development of social formations increasingly organized according to purely rational principles (the means-ends rationality teleology), this shifts attention away from the issue of spatial location. Where this has become a more generalized thesis in social theory, it may account for the neglect of social space as a central issue. However, the past decade has surely indicated a transformation of this situation with a wealth of new studies of social space, studies that seldom refer to Simmel's early work on space.²⁵

IV

The notions of distance and boundaries are important in any sociology of space. Social distance is a phenomenon of particular significance for Simmel. As Donald Levine has commented,

nearly all of the social processes and social types treated by Simmel may be readily understood in terms of social distance. Domination and subordination, the aristocrat and

the bourgeois, have to do with relations defined in terms of 'above' and 'below'. Secrecy, arbitration, the poor person, and the stranger are some of the topics related to the inside-outside dimension.²⁶

We might add that forms of social distance are all the more evident where we exist in close proximity to one another. This is probably nowhere more true than in metropolitan existence.

However, we can also create a distance between ourselves and the metropolis in a number of ways. The notion of the inward retreat can take on a spatial dimension in the form of the bourgeois *interieur*; its private dimension might take the form of the salon, its quasi-public form that of café society. In a more complex manner, we can seemingly simultaneously participate and distance ourselves (although the emphasis might be on distance rather than participation), as in the figure and activity of the flâneur. In this context, Benjamin spoke of 'the flâneur who goes botanizing on the asphalt' (where the flâneur is a kind of collector of images, impressions and experiences that are subject to classification). Baudelaire spoke of the observer, the flâneur, as 'a prince who is everywhere in possession of his *incognito*'. The combination of the preservation of an *incognito* and, at the same time, the botanizing activity of a collector of vignettes and possibly much else, could, as Benjamin suggests, ensure that the flâneur 'can be turned into an unwilling detective', one who 'only seems to be indolent for behind this indolence there is the watchfulness of an observer'.²⁷ This might be a description of the role of a certain kind of sociologist or ethnographer, whose activity oscillates between apparent 'indolence' and 'watchfulness'. If we concur with such a characterization, we might say that whereas 'in the flâneur the joy of watching is triumphant', the results of such observations must be given a systematic form that is informed by theoretical presuppositions in order to render them sociological. In a number of respects, Simmel as an acute observer of the delicate invisible threads' of social interaction might be characterized as a sociological flâneur.²⁸

Certainly we can see the detached but sensitive observer at work indicated by some of Simmel's lighter pieces for *Jugend*: 'Snapshots *sub specie aeternitatis*'. The German word current in Simmel's time for the snapshot, *Momentbild*, better captures the act of distancing ourselves momentarily from reality in order to capture a fleeting image of it for all time. Benjamin later described the activity of taking momentary images: 'A touch of the finger now sufficed to fix an event for an unlimited period of time. The camera gave the moment a posthumous shock, as it were.'²⁹ Such a characterization must be qualified in Simmel's case given his somewhat negative response to photography. The impressionist image may be more appropriate. Simmel's essay on the picture frame suggests another analogy, that of giving a *frame* to fleeting interactions, of tearing them momentarily from a particular context. This suggests that Simmel seeks to preserve what is unique and transitory whilst simultaneously extracting from it its essential *form*, its typicality.

All this is an indication of the significance of the aesthetic dimension in Simmel's work. As he suggests in his essay 'Sociological Aesthetics', our appreciation of an object 'becomes aesthetic only as a result of increasing *distance*, *abstraction* and *sublimation*'. We can create a distance between ourselves and the metropolis by travelling to distant *landscapes*. But as Simmel maintains in his essay 'Alpine Journeys',³⁰ the power of the metropolis and indeed of capitalism also extends to the Alps and transforms our relationship to nature as a

‘framed’ landscape. The aesthetic distance implicit in the framed landscapes of experience in mass tourism are themselves aesthetic, even if merely sublime.

Such reflections may provide us with a context for the reflections of Simmel’s own travel to distant cities, to Rome, Florence and Venice. They are certainly not those of the mass tourist but rather are framed by conceptions of the Italian landscape informed by travellers since Goethe’s Italian aesthetic frames. Simmel’s own reflections upon these cities are dramatically different from his analyses of the tumult of the metropolis, from ‘the economic jungle of the metropolis’.

‘Rome: an aesthetic analysis’ was published in 1898.³¹ It is worth noting from the outset that no such essay by Simmel exists for Berlin. Within Simmel’s own milieu, however, we could point to two such essays on the aesthetic attractions of Berlin. In 1899 there appeared anonymously in *Die Zukunft*, a journal to which Simmel frequently contributed and which was edited by Maximilian Harden, an article entitled ‘The Most Beautiful City in the World’, whose opening section, comparing first images of London, Paris, New York and Berlin, was subtitled ‘Snapshots’ [*Momentbilder*].³² Its author, Walter Rathenau, whose later works displayed the influence of Simmel, examined in a somewhat ironical manner the possibilities for Berlin as a beautiful cityscape. The second example is a longer essay, published in 1908, five years after Simmel’s own metropolis essay, by August Endell, art nouveau architect and designer, entitled ‘The Beauty of the Big City’.³³ It is devoted to Berlin as a big city and presents in an impressionist manner the aesthetic beauty of the metropolis. We can return later to the possibilities for Berlin as an aesthetic landscape as far as Simmel was concerned.

For the moment, what is significant is that Simmel’s essay on Rome, like those on Florence and Venice, is concerned with various forms of aesthetic experience of classical Italian cities. In the essay on Rome a prominent theme is how *beauty* can emerge out of the coming together of seemingly diverse and perhaps indifferent elements. In nature, ‘the mechanical fortuitousness of whose elements can form into beauty as into ugliness’, can be a complement to the work of art which brings fortuitous elements together into an aesthetic totality. However, Simmel argues, in addition to nature and works of art as aesthetic objects,

very seldom we confront a third: that works of human beings, created for whatever diverse purposes of life, are, over and above this to be found together in the form of beauty, so *fortuitously* in their combination as little directed by a will to beauty as are natural forms that know nothing of any purposes. It is almost always only old cities, that have developed without a preconceived plan.³⁴

It is these old cities that have achieved such an aesthetic form. And the emphasis in Simmel’s account is upon the fortuitousness of their creation; ‘the reconciled distance between the *fortuitousness* of the parts and the aesthetic sense of the whole’ is the source of their aesthetic attraction.

What we are confronted with here (and this is also true for the analyses of Florence and Venice) is the aestheticization of a feature of modernity—fortuitousness—that transcends the contradictions of modernity. In the essay on Rome, Simmel contrasts ancient and modern Rome in the following manner: ‘I may leave the parts of Rome that are of uninterrupted modernity and equally uninterrupted ugliness totally aside; for happily they

seldom confront the stranger who takes care'.³⁵ Such advice seems to complement that of Baedeker guides and corresponds with a comment made by Simmel on a holiday in 1917 which he describes as 'totally away from the railway and other such culture'. Rome exists in the aesthetic frame of antiquity and classical forms.

Florence (1906) is the city which most successfully unifies the opposition between nature and intellect, a reconciliation of human artistic design with nature. The city in this resolution is a renaissance work of art, an aesthetic totality of these two elements. In Venice (1907) it is the architectural façades, with their 'precious game', their 'veil', that are dominant. It is 'the artificial city', full of façades in front of which individuals traverse as if on a stage. It is a city of two-dimensional surfaces in which everything moves at the same speed and rhythm. This gives our experience of it a 'dream-like' character. It possesses 'the ambiguous beauty of the adventure that swims rootlessly in life'.³⁶

Although Simmel's account of Venice lays emphasis upon human artifice, it remains true that in none of these instances of classical cities viewed from the perspective of the sensitive aesthetic observer is there real contact with modernity. Simmel's aesthetic analyses of Rome, Florence and Venice raise the question as to whether the metropolis, the showplace of modernity, can, by virtue of being a *showplace* itself, be aesthetically attractive. Can the metropolis be a landscape, an aesthetic cityscape? All avant-garde modernist movements since Baudelaire's declaration of the shocking beauty of the ugly metropolis have answered in the affirmative. Simmel's answer is more ambiguous. If we take his distinction between the work of art and the applied arts, in which the former is something for itself and the latter something for us, then the metropolis is something for us. It is our creation, however much it may appear to us as an endless labyrinth whose elements are always in motion. In his essay 'The Philosophy of Landscape' (1910),³⁷ Simmel indicates a contrast between nature and the metropolis. With respect to elements of nature, he maintains that the fact 'that these things observable upon a piece of earth are "nature"—and not lines of streets with department stores and automobiles, this does not yet make this piece of earth into a landscape'.³⁸ A piece of nature, Simmel continues, is an internal contradiction, since nature can have no 'pieces'. By implication, the metropolis does have 'pieces'—of architecture, moving traffic, interactions, etc. But if the metropolis is not a landscape—or as Benjamin put it, a cityscape—it may still possess aesthetic attraction. Simmel's emphasis upon the metropolis as the focal point of the complex web or labyrinth of interactions that make up the sphere of circulation and exchange of commodities and individuals can also be viewed as a source of the sublime aesthetic experience. Webs and labyrinths are themselves both spatial and aesthetic forms. There is also another aesthetic dimension in the metropolis. The aesthetic experiences of interaction, symmetry, frames, etc. confront us every day in the metropolis, often in *forms* that we ourselves create. It may be that we do not notice them. But one of the tasks of Simmel's social analysis is surely to *reveal* the *forms* of social interaction, in the metropolis as elsewhere.

V

Let us turn, then, to Simmel's analysis of the Berlin metropolis. 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' was published in a volume of the Gehe Foundation's proceedings in Dresden in 1903. The immediate context of this essay on the metropolis was a series of lectures given in the

winter of 1902–3 in connection with an exhibition on the modern metropolis in Dresden. Among other contributors to the volume in which Simmel's essay appears were Karl Bücher (the economic historian and author of *Arbeit und Rhythmus* which Simmel drew upon in the last section of *The Philosophy of Money*), Friedrich Ratzel (the geographer who, Durkheim argued, was an unacknowledged source for some of Simmel's reflections on social space), Dietrich Schäfer, and others. Five years after this volume was published, Schäfer, a historian, was the author of a completely negative, conservative, antisemitic, anonymous reference for Simmel in connection with his unsuccessful attempt to secure the second chair of philosophy at Heidelberg University in 1908. Castigating Simmel for putting "'society" in the place of state and church as the decisive organ of human coexistence', and for much else, Schäfer hardly 'comes away with much of permanent value from Simmel's writings (in so far as they have become familiar to me). It is hardly possible to treat the mental life of the metropolis in a sparser and more biased way than he did in his lecture of that title at the Gehe Foundation in Dresden.'³⁹ Presumably Simmel's analysis of metropolitan 'society' was devoid of references to church and state. At all events, even Simmel's reflections upon the metropolis proved to be as dangerous as some of his experiences of it.

The Dresden exhibition on the modern metropolis was significant in that it gave a positive impetus to further examination of a whole range of dimensions of modern metropolitan existence as well as the physical conditions of major cities in Germany. As Howard Woodhead informs us, in a detailed four-part survey of the 1903 Dresden exhibition published in the *American Journal of Sociology*⁴⁰ in the following year, it was the first German municipal exhibition of its kind. It covered metropolitan traffic, streets, railways; metropolitan expansion of worker and suburban housing; metropolitan public charities, welfare institutions and employment offices; metropolitan public health; education; metropolitan cultural facilities; and so on.

This positive public exhibition of the problems of metropolitan urban existence is in marked contrast to the long-established traditions of cultural pessimism associated with urban life in Germany.⁴¹ The city as the source of all social problems, the site of 'society', in contrast to small town and rural existence was already a common theme in German literature and had taken on in rudimentary form some of the ideological dimensions that were to be capitalized upon subsequently by Nazi ideology. Simmel's essay on the metropolis also stands in dramatic contrast to such illusions of a questionable *Gemeinschaft* existence. In Simmel's essay there is no negative contrast with past forms of existence; metropolitan life is our present and future.

When we turn to Simmel's analysis we find that, in contrast to his formal treatment of social space, the essay-lecture on the metropolis is animated by an immediacy that is lacking in his spatial analysis. None the less, within this context we can see that the city is 'not a spatial entity with sociological consequences, but a sociological entity that is formed spatially'. The metropolis is not merely the focal point of social differentiation and complex of social networks—a theme in Simmel's work at least since 1890 and his study of social differentiation—but also the location of indefinite collectivities such as crowds. The city's openness, which provides for the intersection of diverse social strata, contrasts with the relative isolation and social distance that is manifested in the 'concentrated minority' of the ghetto. Hence, the spatial constellations of the metropolis also provide for the possibility of

total indifference to one's fellow human beings. The development of boundaries and social distance in the metropolis is of fundamental significance in understanding patterns of social interaction and network in the city. Important too is the transcendence of such boundaries and distance in so far as the metropolis is the focal point of the mature money economy whose functional specialization enables it to transcend its own physical location and creates a distinctive kind of trans-spatial community. Money does facilitate 'an interaction and therefore a unification of people who, because of their spatial, social, personal and other discrepancies in interests, could not possibly be integrated into any other group formation'.⁴² Yet, as David Harvey comments in this connection, it is also true that,

by the same token, money creates an enormous capacity to concentrate social power in space, for unlike other use values it can be accumulated at a particular place without restraint. And these immense concentrations of social power can be put to work to realize massive but localized transformations of nature, the construction of built environments, and the like.⁴³

It is indeed one of the virtues of Harvey's more recent analyses of urbanization that he draws upon both Simmel and Marx in order to bring together time, space and the money economy. As he persuasively argues, 'the very existence of money as a mediator of commodity exchange radically transforms and fixes the meanings of space and time in social life and defines limits and imposes necessities upon the shape and form of urbanization'.⁴⁴ Yet for all the plausibility of such arguments, this is not quite the focus of Simmel's essay on the metropolis, however much Simmel maintains that the origin of many of the features of metropolitan existence can be traced back to the money economy.

In *The Philosophy of Money*, Simmel makes a passing reference to 'the economic jungle of the metropolis'. In his essay on the metropolis, the connections between the money economy and the metropolis are developed more fully. The metropolis as 'the seat of the money economy' is dominated by 'the multiplicity and concentration of economic exchange'. The preponderance of exchange values negates 'the individuality of phenomena' and focuses upon 'the objective measurable achievement'. It follows that production is overwhelmingly for the market, the money economy having 'displaced the last survivals of domestic production and the direct barter of goods' by production 'for entirely unknown purchasers who never personally enter the producer's actual field of vision'.⁴⁵

The metropolis is thus not merely the focal point of the money economy but also 'of the highest economic division of labour', with a huge diversity of specialized products and services. The metropolis is the site of antagonistic competition and specialization of function, of 'an inter-human struggle for gain'. In turn this is associated with the creation of ever-new needs:

The seller must always seek to call forth new and differentiated needs of the enticed customer. In order to find a source of income which is not yet exhausted, and to find a function which cannot readily be displaced, it is necessary to specialize in one's services. This process promotes differentiation, refinement, and the enrichment of the public's needs, which obviously must lead to growing personal differences within this public.⁴⁶

The extent of the division of labour in the metropolis therefore is associated with increasing differentiation of products, functions, individuals and their tastes. Such differentiation

and diversity call for the emergence of distinctive occupations whose function is to act as mediators. Indeed, Nietzsche maintained that the domination of the mediator (*Vermittler*) was one of the primary characteristics of modernity.

The increasing differentiation requires a highly developed system of distribution and communications. The complexity of interactions of all kinds in the metropolis are such that

without the strictest punctuality in promises and services the whole structure would break down into an inextricable chaos...this necessity is brought about by the aggregation of so many people with such differentiated interests who must integrate their relations and activities into a highly complex organism.⁴⁷

The result is that ‘punctuality, calculability, exactness are forced upon life by the complexity and extension of metropolitan existence’.

Viewed in this way, the metropolis is the focal point of the division of labour, distribution, communications, the money economy, commodity exchange and consumption. It is a huge network of interactions, and not merely economic ones. The main focus of Simmel’s essay is, however, upon the subjective consequences of metropolitan existence. The economic characteristics of the metropolis outlined above call forth important phenomena that transform individual experience. They can be summarized as intellectual rationality, calculability, indifference, objectivity, anonymity and levelling. However, we should not imagine that individuals fully integrate themselves into the phenomena of the ‘supra-individual contents of life’ which confront them in the metropolis. It is true that the individual appears overwhelmed by the culture of things, by ‘the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions’. The urban individual response is the development of the protective organ of the intellect, of intellectuality in order ‘to preserve subjective life against the overwhelming power of metropolitan life’. The particular form of intellectuality appropriate to metropolitan existence is one which reacts with indifference to external shocks and a whole field of possible interactions. This indifference manifests itself in the personality type of the blasé person who experiences ‘the meaning and differing value of things...as insubstantial’. A levelling of our experience goes along with this process. The economic interactions in the metropolis, for their part, require precision and calculability, a regard to the functions of other participants, who may well remain anonymous. The protective mechanism of reserve in social interaction can lead to aversion and hostility. As Simmel suggests, ‘dissociation’ is an elementary form of sociation; we relate to one another as strangers—‘lonely and lost... in the metropolitan crowd’.

There are other responses to metropolitan existence which Simmel draws attention to in various places. A dedication to fashion, for instance, is concentrated in the metropolis. It can be seen as a reaction against indifference and levelling, an assertion of subjectivity.⁴⁸ So too can personal extravagances and eccentricities, not merely in Dandyism but in the accentuation of personal foibles. A subjective response to which Simmel refers in another context is the interest in spiritualism for instance, as a counter-explanatory world view to the scientific, calculating and objective world view.⁴⁹ More positively, and despite the concentration of the culture of things and our distance from an expanding objective culture, Simmel sees the metropolis as providing the social space for the development of individual independence and individuality.

If we return to the connection between this essay and Berlin then we can concur with the recent judgement relating to discussion of images of Berlin that ‘Simmel was interested in Germany’s metropolis not primarily as the location of political decision, not as the national centre, but as the exemplary location of the development of diversity and contradiction, as the place where a new “quantity of consciousness” and a new “rhythm of sensual-intellectual life” emerged’.⁵⁰ It was precisely such a neglect of the national and political and emphasis upon the cosmopolitan that conservatives such as Schäfer found so intolerable.

VI

Simmel’s interest in the city has been examined at three different levels: most abstractly and formally in the work towards a sociology of space, aesthetically with respect to his treatment of Rome, Florence and Italy, and finally as the labyrinth of modernity that is also the centre of the culture of indifference. In the discussions of social space and the metropolis the dialectics of differentiation are much in evidence. Differentiation is a central theme of Simmel’s social theory; it is also often taken to be a vital feature of modernity. Simmel’s treatment of differentiation in this context is one which is not especially concerned with social class differentiation or the differentiation of public and private space. In the analysis of the metropolis, the *destruction* of social space, highlighted in Benjamin’s⁵¹ or Harvey’s⁵² studies of Paris in the nineteenth century, is absent from Simmel’s discussion. The massive rebuilding of Berlin in order to create one of the most highly developed public transport networks in Europe is not part of Simmel’s focus, even though that which the new communications system facilitated, the rapid circulation of commodities and individuals, is surely one of the key features of *The Philosophy of Money*. Similarly, the correlation of metropolitan existence and the sphere of circulation and exchange does not necessarily lead directly to an examination of social class differentiation in an urban context.

The metropolis as a labyrinth, a web that extends its functional effects into the hinterland, is highlighted by Simmel. Yet the essays on the Italian cities give few indications of the dialectical relationship between the metropolis and the transformation of natural settings, though Simmel’s early discussion of the Alps does precisely that. Indeed, if the metropolis is a focal point of the culture of things, cities in their classical form, where the fortuitous is a virtue, are viewed from an aesthetic distance. These cities do constitute a landscape, whereas in the hectic of metropolitan existence ‘what we survey with a glance or within a momentary horizon is not yet landscape but rather, at most, the material for it’.⁵³