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From Theory to Critique of Modernity The Development of Simmel's Sociology

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Georg Simmel (1858-1918) was an extraordinary figure in German academe. Despite the support he received from famous colleagues such as Max Weber and Heinrich Rickert, Simmel did not get tenure until 1914, when he joined Strasbourg University; a rather peripheral school at the time. Certainly, powerful antisemitist sentiments in the educational bureaucracy were partly responsible for Simmel's position as an academic outsider.¹ And, in turn, his peripheral position partly explains why there is no stable tradition of "Formal Sociology." Of course, Simmel's writings continue to influence contemporary sociology; especially exchange theory, conflict sociology, role theory, and small group research (Mills, 1965; Coser, 1965; Levine, Carter, and Gorman, 1976). And, more recently, critical theorists of modernity and postmodernity (Frisby, 1985; Dahme and Rammstedt, 1984) have re-discovered the late Simmel's pessimistic diagnosis of modern culture. But, generally, his work is regarded as a pool of seemingly unrelated ideas, not as a coherent paradigm for social theory.²

Unlike Marx, Weber, Durkheim, or Parsons, Simmel did not attempt to develop a general and systematic framework for social theory. Therefore, we regard him today as a "semi-classic" only. Simmel's explicitly sociological writings make up only a small portion of his work. After his grand *Sociology* (1908), he begins to lose interest in the field and turns to more philosophical and metaphysical issues. Overall, Simmel was an essayist rather than a social theorist (Frisby, 1981). Especially Simmel's later, much less-known, writings lack a homogeneous subject-matter and frame of reference. In an almost literary style, they deal with religion and music, with great individuals such as Rembrandt, Kant, and Goethe, with fashion and art, and with the seemingly banal experiences of everyday life.

But there might be yet another reason for the unsystematic and fragmentary character of Simmel's oeuvre. Due to the loose organizational and professional

structure of emerging German sociology, the discipline was still lacking a consistent theoretical framework, as well as a subject-matter *sui generis* (Aaron, 1964; Abel, 1965). Therefore, numerous intellectual movements from within and outside academic science shaped emerging sociology. Since the multifaceted intellectual culture around the *fin de siècle* was not yet separated into fully professionalized disciplines, emerging sociology was largely the business of “intellectuals” in the classical sense of the term.

That is, German sociologists were not so much academic specialists confined to universities, but rather participants in larger metropolitan upper class cultures. Being a *Privatdozent* at Berlin University, Simmel was very much part of this culture, and probably spent more time with artists and poets than with academics (see Gassen and Landmann, 1958). Particularly, the conservative and romantic critique of modern culture and the passionate irrationalism expressed in the “philosophy of life” (*Lebensphilosophie*) were fashionable among Berlin intellectuals at the time (Lieber, 1974).

The problem faced by a comprehensive presentation of Simmel’s sociology and philosophy is that he draws upon so many diverse academic and intellectual movements. Among them are the philosophy of life, the conservative critique of modernity, positivism, organicism, and Neokantian epistemology. Following Landmann (1968), we may very roughly distinguish three phases in the development of Simmel’s thought.

During the first phase (1890-1900), Simmel is concerned with establishing “Formal Sociology” as a legitimate scientific discipline. To gain epistemic legitimacy, early sociology had to turn away from speculative philosophy and model its methods and subject-matter after the natural sciences. As social physics, sociology must analyze social processes such as interaction or differentiation in the same manner as physics or biology analyze natural processes. Society can be analyzed according to the research canons of empirical science. Positivist method and organicist conception of society à la Spencer determine Simmel’s sociology during this phase.

During the second phase (1900-1908), Simmel contributes to the Neokantian project to replace historicism by a “critique of historical reason”.³ Like Weber, Simmel is now especially interested in the transcendental presuppositions of the humanities, especially history. As opposed to the first phase, Simmel now adheres to the dualist Neokantian position in the German *Methodenstreit* holding that “idiographic” differ substantially from “nomothetic” sciences. During this second phase, Simmel is no longer primarily concerned with developing sociology as empirical science. Even his grand *Sociology* (1908) deals extensively with broad epistemological issues.

Finally, the third phase (1908-1918) is devoted to the philosophy of life and the critique of modernity. With Bergson, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, Simmel now turns against the rationalism of an objectified culture that is no longer rooted in

concrete individual experience. In his monographs about great individuals such as Goethe or Rembrandt, Simmel celebrates the cult of the creative genius who alone manages to escape from the iron cage of alienated culture. In his later writings, Simmel expresses the deep existential pessimism underlying the “tragic consciousness” (Lenk, 1987) of German intellectuals at the time. With Weber he shares the heroic attitude of the bourgeois individual who fights a lonely and hopeless fight against the alienating but inevitable forces of modernity. With Adorno, whom Simmel influenced via Lukacs and Bloch, the late Simmel shares the vague hope that art might be the only lifeform capable of resisting reification.

I shall suggest that despite the unsystematic and essayistic character of his work, Simmel always dealt with one grand theme: the relationship between individualism and modernity. In fact, his changing evaluation of this relationship marks the transition from sociological theory to philosophical critique of modernity. This transition occurs in the last chapter of the *Philosophy of Money* (1900/1978), but is already present in *Social Differentiation* (1890); much earlier than research on Simmel has assumed.

Modernity and Individual Freedom I: Early Writings

Simmel’s early account of the origins of modernity closely resembles the analyses given by Spencer (1874-96) and Durkheim (1893/1964). Like Spencer, Simmel (1890) understands social differentiation as a special case of natural evolution. Social differentiation occurs because differentiated societies can perform more heterogeneous tasks more effectively. The development of societies follows the same general laws as the development of natural species. Demographic growth leads to increased competition over scarce resources and, in turn, competition leads to functional and vertical differentiation.

According to Simmel (1890), social differentiation favors the emergence of modern individualism for several reasons. First, the expansion of “social circles” (groups, communities, societies), which follows processes of differentiation, weakens social control, and increases individual autonomy. While small and homogeneous communities tightly control and supervise their members, more differentiated and larger societies must grant individuals more mobility and independence. Furthermore, social differentiation leads to multiple memberships in overlapping social circles. In this way, the modern individual is possible as a unique combination of diverse roles and organizational memberships.

At this point, it is very important to note that Simmel works with two entirely different notions of individuality: individuality¹ and individuality² (Simmel, 1957). Much confusion in Simmel’s argument and its interpretation can be avoided if these two notions are distinguished very clearly. Individuality¹ is the concept of individuality developed by 18th century rationalist enlightenment philosophy (see Hamlyn,

1987:206-216; Jones, 1952:805ff.; Habermas, 1973). This concept focusses on the abstract and egalitarian autonomy of agents acting according to their own free wills and private interests. Economically, individuality¹ means formally free and independent market actors exchanging material resources to maximize profits within the limits set by contractual law. Economic agents behave according to utilitarian preferences and rational choices, not according to the corporate solidarities invested in traditional markets. Within the limits of contractual law, any action that is not explicitly prohibited is permitted. This economic model of individuality¹ was first developed by Scottish utilitarian philosophy and classical economics.

Ethically, individuality¹ refers to rational and responsible moral actors who follow self-imposed rules that, ideally, express the generalized ethical viewpoint of humankind. Morally autonomous subjects do not observe prescriptive loyalties and ascriptive obligations, but follow the abstract and revisable standards of Practical Reason. This is the model of individuality¹ introduced by Kantian ethics.

Politically, individuality¹ means a sovereign corporate body of political actors collectively determining their own legislation within a nation state. Free citizens realize their “natural” constitutional rights to discuss and decide on public affairs. This notion was first propagated by French political philosophy; taking the classical Greek polis as its historical model.

And finally, the epistemic individual¹ uses abstract Theoretical or “Pure” Reason to discard all those (religious and metaphysical) beliefs that fail to pass critical empirical and logical examination. The modern epistemic subject originated in Cartesian and Kantian epistemology.

In sum, individuality¹ refers to the legal, ethical, political, and epistemic autonomy of independent agents acting according to private but generalizable interests. It is this notion of individuality we commonly associate with societal modernity; i.e., with political democracy, market economy, privatized morality, and scientific rationality (Parsons, 1966, 1971).

On the other hand, the concept of individuality² was developed by 19th century romanticism. As opposed to individuality¹, individuality² captures the substantive differences between unique personalities, not what is abstractly shared by autonomous subjects. The romantic notion of individuality² emerged *in opposition* to the “pale” and “fleshless” rationalist concept of individuality¹ (see Walzel, 1965). Individuality² is expressed in the romantic idealization of the *genius*, not in the rationalist trinity of *bourgeois*, *homme*, and *citoyen*.

Simmel did not always clearly distinguish between these two opposed concepts of individuality, and much confusion in the interpretation of Simmel’s theory of modernity has resulted from this failure. While some interpreters (e.g., Turner and Beeghley, 1981) have concluded that Simmel celebrates modernity as the great promoter of individual freedom, others (e.g., Dahme and Rammstedt, 1984) insist that for Simmel, modernity is incompatible with living an individualized life. But I

would say that both interpretations are correct because they refer to different notions of individuality. Simmel never ceased to believe that the forces of modernity; i.e., differentiation, money, positive law, and formal logic emancipated individuality¹ from traditional bonds. But, in his later works, he more and more realized that individuality²; i.e., the concrete being of unique personalities, was incompatible with modernity and remained possible only in the lifeform of the creative genius. Thus, I would argue that there is no *radical* break in Simmel's thought; strictly separating early sociology and theory of modernity from later metaphysics and critique of modernity. What happened, I believe, is that Simmel became more and more interested in the romantic notion of individuality² and realized that unlike individuality¹, individuality² was endangered by modernity. In this view, the only real discontinuity in Simmel's work is a shift in interest and a corresponding change in his style of thinking. It remains true, however, that Simmel did become a cultural critic of modernity instead of continuing to be its sociological theorist and apologist. When did this transition occur?

It is generally assumed that the transition from sociological theory to metaphysical critique of modernity occurs in the *Philosophy of Money* (1900/1978). But critical remarks against modernity are already present in *Social Differentiation* (1890), one of Simmel's earliest positivist treatises. As we have already seen, Simmel (1890) argues that social differentiation liberates individuality¹ by weakening social control. At the same time, social differentiation leads to professional specialization so that individuality² is structurally possible because of the diversity of complex occupational status sets. Individuals² all differ from each other since they all occupy different *sets* of roles and memberships; at any given point in time as well as in the course of a unique biography.

The crisis of individuality², however, arises when a combination of diverse roles cannot compensate for the alienating consequences of professional specialization. Like Marx, Simmel realizes that in the long run, specialization will contradict a "fully developed" individuality². The narrow restrictions specialization imposes on individual life can partially be compensated by the diversity of role sets, but Simmel predicts that specialization will eventually impoverish individual life. The technological development of society requires further specialization, but further specialization is incompatible with individuality²: "It is impossible to build a house out of houses (Simmel, 1890:138)."

Modernity and Individual Freedom II: The Transition to Critique of Modernity in the "Philosophy of Money" (1900)

Current mainstream Simmel-interpretations regard the *Philosophy of Money* (1900/1978) as an early treatise on economics or exchange theory (e.g., Turner, 1986; Collins, 1988). But Simmel himself understood his book as dealing with metaphysics

and ontology. In this sense, the *Philosophy of Money* belongs to the later phase of his work when Simmel abandons sociology and empirical science altogether. For Simmel, money is much more than an economic unit mediating exchange. Money exemplifies an ontological principle: the creations of humankind tend to separate from their creators and begin to live an independent life. Once created, this realm of external reality or “objective culture” *constrains* human action and experience. Although money, as well as all economic value, originally emerges from the subjective desire to possess a scarce and distant good, money soon circulates through world markets that escape our direct and conscious control, and that determine our actions “behind our backs.” As a reality *sui generis*, money only re-instates what Simmel later calls the universal “tragedy of culture”:

The philosophical significance of money is that it represents within the practical world the most certain image and the clearest embodiment of the formula of all being, according to which things receive their meaning through each other, and have their being determined by their mutual relations (Simmel, 1900/1978:128-129).

Simmel’s philosophy of money is the metaphysical answer to Marxism. Like Weber (1904-05/1930), Simmel wants to correct the materialistic one-sidedness that he sees in Marx’ theory of history. But Simmel goes far beyond Weber in that he replaces historical sociology by speculative metaphysics. In fact, Simmel’s philosophy of money anticipates the metaphysical turn Marxism took in the Critical Theory of Adorno and Horkheimer. Their *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (1972) de-historized Marx’ theory of capitalism to a “critique of instrumental reason” that sees reification and unfreedom emerge with the rise of instrumental control over nature. What Marx argued was the result of wage labor and what he hoped would disappear together with private property, Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) believed was inherent in the metaphysical destiny of occidental reason. Similarly, Simmel’s philosophy of money narrates the tragedy of culture, not just the historical rise and expansion of capitalism. The emergence of money and modernity shows once more that the creations of humankind become separated from their creators and their original intentions.

As in *Social Differentiation* (1890) and, to a lesser extent, in *Sociology* (1908), the crucial theme of the *Philosophy of Money* is the relationship between modernity and individual freedom. As the quintessential force of modernity, money liberates individuality¹. Money permits the expansion of trade beyond local markets. Without money, exchanges depend on the concrete complementarity of particular demands and supplies. By mediating exchanges, money separates exchange from use values and thus extends the range of trade. In turn, the expansion of markets increases the size of communities and thus weakens social control. Trade leads to larger and more cosmopolitan associations among people. Urbanization and the formation of nation states replace village communities, and thus emancipate individuals¹ from tight

supervision and permanent local control.

Money also changes the structures of social relationships. Even within feudal serfdom, money permits dependent peasants to produce whatever they want since tributes no longer have to be paid in kind. Monetary tributes increase the autonomy of serfs since they can now decide what to produce. Generally, money de-personalizes social relationships and power structures. Simmel (1900/1978:297-303) observes that industrial workers receiving money wages are not subordinates to individual entrepreneurs, but to formal organizational power. The de-personalization of power structures is experienced as liberation and increasing autonomy. Money replaces the control over persons by the organizational control over labor, and one-sided personal dependencies by mutual contractual obligations.

In respect to social structure, money separates “having” from “being.” In feudal societies, property depends on ascribed social status; “being” determines the chances of “having.” Money, on the other hand, is indifferent toward particular occupations or ascribed social statuses. Money can be earned in many different ways, by many different persons, and it can be spent to buy any good that can be sold. That is, money makes possible geographic and social mobility as well as individual autonomy. In short, by modernizing social structure, money emancipates individuality¹ from tight social control, from patrimonial authority, and from restrictions on mobility.

Finally, and very characteristically, Simmel (1900/1978:321-326) examines the relationship between money and freedom according to a figure of thought prominent in idealist philosophy. For idealist philosophy (see Hegel, 1958), freedom is the ability to control the external world, or to realize one’s individuality by subjecting nature to one’s will. But since the empirical world is partially independent and operates according to its internal laws and regularities, nature restricts human control and thus individual freedom. Money, however, does not have a real material being. Unlike other external objects, money does not resist our attempts at control. Or, to say it in terms of political economy, money has no use value but only exchange value. Even paper bills are not essential, for they can be replaced by manipulating balances in bank accounts. Thus, money is not a part of nature and does not have any intrinsic material properties that would resist human control. Therefore, Simmel optimistically concludes, money is the perfect being of individual freedom.

Money or Freedom

But still within the *Philosophy of Money*, Simmel turns into a critic of money and modernity. As a social theorist of rationalization, he celebrates money as the great promoter of individual freedom. But, as a cultural critic of rationalization, Simmel examines the alienating consequences that money and modernity have for concrete individual life. Simmel begins to realize that he is dealing with two different notions of individuality: individuality¹ and individuality². Consequently, he discovers the

Janusface of modernity. Modernity emancipates individuals¹ from traditional obligations and patrimonial domination, but at the same time, it depersonalizes and reifies the concrete experiences of individuals².

Money rationalizes the style of modern life (Simmel, 1900/1978:429ff.). Metropolitan society converts all social relationships into rational exchanges between economic individuals¹. Modern urban life is experienced as a series of instrumental calculations designed to realize utilitarian goals through complex teleological chains of action. The *blase* and detached attitude of the metropolitan individual is the psychological *pendant* to the commodification of interpersonal relations. In the metropolis, time is money, nature is created environment, space is real estate, and social relations are commodity exchanges. The urbanization of life transforms individual experience into a meaningless sequence of disconnected sensory shocks. As a stranger among strangers, the metropolitan individual has lost his or her biography and face. Although the monetarization of society rationalizes power, weakens social control, and thus liberates individuals¹, money turns concrete individuals² into abstract owners of property.

Again, Simmel (1900/1978:448-463) emphasizes that money only exemplifies the general tendency of objective culture to separate from its creators, and then subject human life and experience to abstract and impersonal laws. As a part of objective culture, money is similar to law and logic:

All three factors - the law, intellectuality, and money - are characterized by their complete indifference to individual qualities; all three extract from the concrete totality of the streams of life one abstract, general factor which develops according to its own independent norms and which intervenes in the totality of existential interests and imposes itself upon them (Simmel, 1900/1978:441-442).

Modern positive law treats all individuals as abstract legal subjects. The formal rationality of positive law replaces substantive justice and its concern for the differences between unique individual cases. Likewise, formal logic is indifferent toward the concrete meanings of particular linguistic symbols or propositions. Although they once emerged from concrete thinking, the codified rules of formal logic, as part of objective culture, constrain what is accepted as formally proper reasoning. As forces of modernity, positive law, money and formal logic share an objective indifference toward the concrete reality of individual² life (Pohlmann, 1987). For individuals², liberation *through* modernity turns into emancipation *from* modernity. During the third and last phase of his work, Simmel struggles with one major problem: how can individuality² be rescued from the tragic dialectic of modernity and objective culture?

Modernity and Individual Freedom III: The Philosophy of Life

For Simmel (1918), “life”, the central notion of his late philosophy, represents *the* philosophical paradigm of the 20th century. According to Simmel, each intellectual epoch has its central paradigm. Ancient Greek philosophy revolved around the concept of “Being,” medieval scholasticism was preoccupied with the problem of how to conceptualize “God,” enlightenment rationalism replaced God by a moral notion of Nature, and the 19th century discovered “society” as its central problematic.

Simmel’s idea of “life” rejects empirical science and analytical reasoning. His increasingly critical attitude toward modernity leads Simmel to radically abandon systematic empirical inquiry and generalizing conceptual reason as instruments of unfreedom and alienation. Simmel’s primary concern is now with individuality²; i.e., with the problem of how the uniqueness of individual life is possible. He faces the same dilemma as the late Adorno (1973): how can individuality² be described in terms of a scientific reason whose abstract categories and formal logical procedures aim at the general properties of empirical objects, not at individual peculiarities?

Simmel and Adorno escape this dilemma by renouncing conceptual reason and systematic theorizing altogether. They replace them by what could be called “mimesis” or “aesthetic reflection.” Aesthetic reflection uses non-conceptual insight (Zenck, 1977). That is, aesthetic reflection does not move toward systematic theory, but favors impressionistic snapshots of reality. The essayistic style of Simmel’s later writings is not chosen accidentally; rather, essayism reflects Simmel’s avoidance of systematic theory and conceptual thought for being unable to capture the peculiar, the individual, and the non-generalizable (Frisby, 1985).

Consequently, Simmel’s (1918) notion of “life” is rather impressionistic and intuitive. Life is a continuous stream of inner experiences and emotions (Gorsen, 1966). The continuous flow of individual life is not experienced as a sequence of clearly distinguishable thoughts, impressions, and moods but as a diffuse and amorphous mass of chaotic sensations and feelings. To analyze the stream of life scientifically would be to distinguish what is experienced without clear distinctions. Life is always experienced in the here and now of the present moment, but, at the same time, extends into the future (desires and expectations) and into the past (memories). The totality of life can never be analyzed, only experienced. In the stream of consciousness, vague and unrelated impressions constantly come and go, passing emotions and thoughts suddenly appear, intermingle, and then quickly disappear again even before we can become aware of them.

For Simmel, life is always “more-than-life” because it materializes into the artifacts of objective culture, such as language, art, or technology. Simmel defines “objective culture” as the ensemble of all material and symbolic artifacts that are created by humankind, but separate from their creators as soon as creation is completed. This process of separation is the core of what Simmel (1918/1968) calls the “tragedy” or “basic conflict” of culture. Whereas life is always experienced as

a concrete totality of undifferentiated emotions, thoughts, and impressions, the institutions of objective culture represent separate and autonomous aspects of reality. While the stream of actual concrete experience merges emotions with cognitions, and aesthetic pleasure with theoretical insight, the institutions of objective culture separate art from science, science from morality, and morality from politics. As soon as the expressions of life become institutionalized as objective culture, they develop a life of their own and, paradoxically, begin to *constrain* individual life (Weingartner, 1965).

The universal tragedy of culture expands the ontology of alienation that Simmel outlined in his *Philosophy of Money*. Alienation and reification do not result from capitalism but co-emerge with the institutions of objective culture. Like Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (1972), Simmel's pessimistic philosophy of history dramatizes alienation and unfreedom as the inevitable destiny of the human species. The forces of modernity (differentiation, money, law, and logic) only *accelerate* history and thus dramatically broaden the gap between objective culture and individual life. In modern times, the rapid industrial accumulation of objective culture goes hand in hand with and presupposes the increasing impoverishment of individual life and experience. While the institutions of objective culture become more and more refined, individual life is less and less creation and more and more consumption. Objective culture accumulates precisely to the extent to which the division of labor reduces individual life to monotonous routines and repetitive behaviors.

Therefore, Simmel (1918/1968:25) observes, the protest against modernity is not just a protest against particular institutions of objective culture, but against objective culture or "form" itself.⁴ Simmel holds that antimodernism is both antiformalism and antitraditionalism; "life" protests against all "form." Antimodernism is fundamentally anarchistic, for it rejects all traditions, institutions, and cultural conventions for imprisoning creative subjectivity. But, for Simmel, radical antimodernism is doomed to failure since "life" *needs* "forms" to materialize. The tragedy of culture means precisely that to become real, the spontaneous creativity of individual life must materialize in the objective forms of culture which, once created, become independent and then constrain individual life. The radical antimodern protest against objective culture itself is unrealistic since without "form," life cannot manifest itself as external reality. Therefore, Simmel asserts, antimodernism does not show us the way out of the tragedy of culture. Instead, Simmel advocates a solution very similar to that of Weber: only the private lifestyle of the heroic individual may reconcile the paradoxical duality modernity has established between life and form.

Individual Law

To overcome the alienating dualism between concrete individual life and impersonal objective culture, “life” itself must determine the forms of its existence. In respect to ethical conduct, for example, the tragic conflict of modern culture opposes general moral norms to individual moral sentiments. Simmel (1968) criticizes Kantian ethics for advocating the rule of abstract ethical reason over individual moral conduct. Kant equates morality with generality. The categorical imperative holds that to be valid, moral norms must represent a generalizable ethical standpoint. Valid norms must pass the test of abstract and universal Practical Reason.

Simmel (1968), on the other hand, wants moral norms to emerge from the concrete totality of individual life, so that the dualism between individuality² and objective culture might be overcome. Simmel’s moral actor is the romantic individual², not the Kantian individual¹. Simmel insists that moral sentiments are experienced in an essentially individualistic way. They express a sense of responsibility for the integrity of one’s personal life. Simmel replaces the abstract moral actor of Kantian ethical formalism by concrete individuals² deciding for themselves which rules to follow. The Individual Law does not claim universal validity but assimilates validity to the authenticity of individual moral sentiments. Moral rules are valid for an individual only, and only insofar as they express a genuine moral feeling. The Individual Law overcomes the tragic dualism of culture by reconciling morality with individual life.

The Individual Outlook on Life (“Lebensanschauung”)

In his late monographies about great individuals such as Goethe and Rembrandt, Simmel (1913, 1916) continues to work out his individualistic philosophy of life. In the *Individual Law* he criticized Kantian ethical formalism for subjecting “life” to the abstract postulates of Practical Reason. In *Lebensanschauung* (1918), Simmel celebrates the genius who alone manages to overcome the tragic dualism of culture by subjecting “form” to “life.” The genius breaks free from traditional forms of thought and conventional techniques of aesthetic production, and re-creates the world according to his or her inner experiences and creativity. The creative lifeform of the genius constructs the world all over again; in fact, s/he creates a new world.

According to Simmel (1913, 1916), Goethe and Rembrandt escape from the alienating domination of objective culture. They create a radically individualistic mode of literary and aesthetic production. For example, Goethe’s outlook on life is “true” precisely to the extent to which it expresses his innermost individual feelings and experiences. Simmel is no longer interested in “truth” as part of objective culture; i.e., in scientifically testable propositions about the external world. Rather, radically individualistic philosophy assimilates the truth of propositions about the empirical world to the authenticity of subjective visions. The genius’ outlook on life cannot be

assessed by the conventional standards of objective culture since, to an extent, the genius changes these very standards. Revolutionary creativity cannot be “true” or “false,” it can only be “authentic”.

Of course, the creations of the genius inevitably become part of objective culture, and then crystallize into “paradigms” constraining further aesthetic or scientific production. Revolutionary turns into normal science, and aesthetic breakthroughs become trapped in cultural establishments. The pessimistic philosophy of history predicts that, in the long run, the tragedy of culture will prevail over heroic attempts of individuals at escape. In moments of revolutionary creativity, the genius is able to destroy the lifeless forms of objective culture, but soon his or her creations turn into objective culture themselves. Happiness, the temporary harmony of subjective and objective culture, is a quickly passing emotion, for it dies with the creative act.

Like the philosophy of individual morality, Simmel’s philosophy of the genius advocates a radical subjectivism as the only way to mitigate the tragedy of culture. Like Adorno (1984), Simmel radically turns away from sociology and empirical science, for they only perpetuate the predominance of objective culture and instrumental reason. Simmel and Adorno share the hope “that the experience of art, privatized as it tends to be, is nonetheless the best bulwark against the absolute domination of the administered world (Jay, 1984:158).” Individual freedom cannot be captured by abstract science, for only aesthetic reflection is able to cast a light on what science cannot see. Radical individualism is not possible as science but only as practical lifeform. Science and philosophy represent objective culture, perpetuate its tragedy, and thus cannot overcome reification and unfreedom. In fact, it is abstract conceptual rationality itself that must be abandoned if individuality² is to be preserved. As part of objective culture, scientific and philosophical rationality help eliminate individuality². Their concern for abstract regularities and general principles is incompatible with the peculiar and the unique. Philosophical reason realizes that it is part of the very process of reification it pretends to unmask, and turns against itself or into “negative dialectics” (Adorno, 1973).

Thus, Simmel and Adorno share a vision of philosophy abandoning conceptual closure and rigid systemness; a philosophy that is capable of understanding the individual without reducing it to an instance of the general. In Adorno’s (1973:13) words, the substance of such a philosophy

would lie in the diversity of objects that impinge upon it and of the objects it seeks, a diversity not wrought by any schema; to those objects philosophy would truly give itself rather than use them as a mirror in which to reread itself, mistaking its own image for concretion.

Conclusion: A Note on the Social Origins of the Critique of Modernity

The Individual Law and the individual outlook on life seek to re-establish a meaningful life in the meaningless world of objective culture. Simmel suggests the retreat into private life as a means to escape from alienation and unfreedom. This suggestion seems to be typical of contemporary pessimistic philosophies of modernity. Weber (1915/1946), for example, argued that in modernity, irreconcilable cultural and institutional orders (such as art, the law, the economy, and politics) destroy the belief in the world as a meaningful unity once nourished by metaphysical and religious worldviews. The disenchantment of metaphysical worldviews and the rationalization of profane action systems subject individual life to impersonal social forces (Lash and Whimster, 1987). In the bureaucratic world, meaningful life remains possible only as heroic gesture.

Like Simmel, Weber suggests the retreat into the microcosmos of individual life to escape from the totalitarian ubiquity of bureaucratic and instrumental rationality. This is not to say that Weber advocated an escapist flight from the secular world. But, clearly, Weber believed that if a meaningful life was to be regained in modernity, it was possible only as a deep existential commitment of *individuals* to some unifying goal of life. For Weber, making sense of a senseless and rationalized world was a problem that only individuals could attempt to solve. As opposed to Simmel, Weber was too much of a realist to radically abandon empirical science as an instrument of unfreedom and alienation, but clearly he was aware of science being part of and partially responsible for the rationalized meaninglessness of the world.

The social situation of German intellectuals may explain the pessimistic view of history and modernity shared by many at the time. Possibly, the pessimistic diagnosis of modernity reflected the changing role of intellectuals in modern society. Fritz Ringer (1969) has shown how industrialization and bureaucratization gradually led to the decline of the “mandarins;” i.e., of the intellectual academic elite in pre-War Germany. Traditionally, German intellectuals - especially those working in philosophy, the social sciences, and the humanities - saw themselves as guardians of societal integrity and rationality. The mandarin intellectuals developed a professional ideology that regarded *Bildung* and *Kultur* as its privileged domain. *Bildung* was not merely education in the technical and credential sense of the term, but cultivation of character and lifestyle. *Kultur* was not merely material and profane civilization but the dignified realm of the unworldly “spirit” (*Geist*) and its cultural achievements. The social prestige and legitimacy of the intellectual elite drew upon the belief that intellectual work was not yet another specialized occupation but rather provided the *foundations* for culture and society. Intellectuals were the official and authoritative interpreters of the “grand issues” of cultural discourse and edification, such as the meaning of history, the nature of knowledge, the moral foundations of social life, and

the spiritual cultivation of the individual. The mandarin ideology was a secular idealist religion of the pure intellect.

Rapid industrialization, bureaucratization, and professionalization, however, profoundly changed the role of universities and the structure of intellectual work (McClelland, 1980). Intellectuals could no longer credibly claim to be the priests of cultural edification. They gradually turned into competitive specialist researchers and members of professional communities. The increasingly specialized and bureaucratic structure of intellectual production no longer supported the elitist ideology of intellectuals as secular priests. In *Science as a Vocation*, Weber (1922/1946) related the professionalization of science to the disenchantment of occidental culture. Unlike charismatic intellectual leaders, scientists are not authorized to interpret the meaning of the world. With growing professionalization, intellectuals are no longer in a privileged position to address existential issues of meaning. Rather, they are institutionally committed to the systematic and “disinterested” study of narrow and specialized research areas.

Consequently, the intellectuals blamed “modernity” for its pragmatism, instrumental orientation, and for its “superficial” and “shallow” ideals. Intellectuals attacked the narrow utilitarian view of intellectual work that accompanied rapid German industrialization. They despised modern mass education as undermining the traditional ideals of *Bildung* and moral cultivation, and complained about the “soulless” and “shallow” character of technological rationalization (Ringer, 1969). Since the modern mass university delivers educational services and distributes credentials, its intellectuals can no longer claim cultural priesthood and authoritative control over metaphysical problems.

In this view, the tragic critique of modernity common among German intellectuals in the late 19th and early 20th century generalized their collective social experiences of status loss and prestige decline: “In a curious way, the whole theory of cultural decadence was a projection of the intellectual’s personal fears and doubts upon the rest of society (Ringer, 1969:267).” That is, the alleged “tragedy of culture” really was the tragedy of the old intellectual mandarin elite facing the decline of its traditional prestige and status. The old intellectual elite was critical of modernity because industrialization and professionalization changed the structure of intellectual work, and undermined the elitist ideology of cultural priesthood. Intellectuals lost their old prestige and status, but they interpreted their social decline to mean that history itself was losing its sense.

Notes

¹ For Simmel's biography see Coser (1965) and Gassen and Landmann (1958).

² Simmel (1923:1) himself anticipated this: "My intellectual legacy is like money being distributed to many different heirs. Each of them will use his part of my legacy according to his unique needs, so that nobody will be able to see that it is my legacy they utilize."

³ For a collection of Simmel's writings on this issue see Simmel (1980).

⁴ By "anitmodern protest" Simmel means a variety of intellectual movements. For example, the German Youth Movement was "antimodern" in the sense that it rejected all traditions and conventions as restricting individual freedom. But Simmel holds that expressionism in art or pragmatism in epistemology are "antimodern" in that "life" claims its right over "form." Expressionism subjects the forms of aesthetic production to inner individual experiences, and pragmatism reduces abstract truth to instrumental success.

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