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Sociologists of the Unexpected: Edward A. Ross and Georg Simmel on the Unintended Consequences of Modernity

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The modern increase in opportunities for social activities also brings with it unintended side effects posed by the liberating potential and the acceleration of modern life. In this paper it is argued that the views reflected in Georg Simmel's formal approach and in American sociologist Edward A. Ross' reformative sociology are (1) complementary and (2) offer fresh insights for our current sociological understanding of unexpected consequences in contemporary "high modernity" or knowledge societies. A long forgotten nexus between the ideas of Simmel's and the work of Ross will be reviewed in order to point out affinities between the two authors' takes on the unintended and sometimes tragic moments in modern culture and their relevance for sociology today. Based on these discussions a fundamental mode for framing the unexpected in modern society as a recursively-linked component to the intended is illustrated.

Introduction

Classical social thinkers like Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Georg Simmel have often taken a rather pessimistic attitude towards the path of modern history. In the case of Marx this pessimism was related to his view of the development of capitalism; for Weber it was the impersonal and rational application of bureaucracy in modern society that caused it. Simmel's take in this respect was more broadly conceived. It is often claimed that he went so far as to see a general tragedy in all cultural achievements of modern societies.

Today it is commonly accepted that Simmel's sociology was probably one of the most important German influences on American sociology in the early years of the twentieth century, a nexus that came about especially through early translations by Albion W. Small as well as the introduction of Simmel's thinking via the work of Robert E. Park.¹ However, it appears that the unexpected in modern life suggested by Simmel was less well-incorporated into American sociology. This impression might have to do with the fact that Simmel's general influence on American sociology has been well documented, but a specific connec-

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tion to the work of classical American sociologist Edward A. Ross has so far been excluded. Having been a student of Simmel in the later 1880s, Ross might have taken over some of Simmel's ideas in order to build up his own sociological framework.

In the following discussion this forgotten nexus will be introduced in order to suggest affinities between the two authors' takes on uncertainties and unintended consequences in the development of modern culture. This is extremely important because the issue of the sociology of the unintended or the unexpected has been central ever since the early days of the discipline and was generally contrasted to the "linear regularities" where "consequences follow cumulatively from certain premises," as Alejandro Portes (2000: 2) has recently observed. Portes goes on to say that "sociology seems to have a different, alternative vocation, defined by its sensitivity to the dialectics of things, unexpected turns of events, and the rise of alternative countervailing structures" (*ibid.*: 2-3). Already the classical sociological analysis of the concept of "unanticipated consequences" by Robert K. Merton (1936) tackled this theme. Merton identified five sources of unanticipated consequences: ignorance, error, basic values, the so-called imperious immediacy of interest, and finally the self-defeating prediction. Although Merton saw that unanticipated consequences can also have desirable effects (1936: 895), he only developed this idea with regards to scientific research, called "serendipity," that is, an anomalous finding that gives rise to a new theory (Merton 1968: 157-162). In a similar vein, although not referring to Merton, Znaniecki (1940: 164-178) tried to categorize the social roles that different types of scientists take and how this relates to the discovery of "new and unexpected facts." Znaniecki suggested that the unexpected is only welcomed "if it upsets the theories of other schools" and thus the discoverer of the unexpected, who Znaniecki also called the explorer, "has no place in a milieu of scientists with well-regulated traditional roles" (1940: 173). He concluded that the willingness to actually find and see the unexpected is largely dependent from the respective social structures of a scientists' environment.

More contemporary sources on "the unexpected" and the importance of unintended consequences can for instance be found in the work of Ulrich Beck (1997), Anthony Giddens (1990), or Aaron Wildavsky (1995). In Wildavsky's understanding, especially environmental and safety issues have become an area where greater knowledge has increased evidence of harm from technology (Wildavsky 1995: 433-447). What worries Wildavsky is that expert knowledge is being devalued by lower forms of knowledge as well as ignorance or, as I will call it in the following, as non-knowledge.² Beck and Giddens have a more developed idea of the importance of the unexpected. Both observe that unpredictability and decreased control, together with unintended side effects, are to be understood as the main driving force of contemporary societies. Giddens even describes high modernity, a term that he prefers for post- or second modernity, as a "juggernaut" (Giddens 1990: 139; 151-154), a relentlessly driving and sometimes grim "engine" that can only partly be steered by human society. More recently, Giddens has labeled the unpredictability and uncontrollability of the modern world a "runaway world" (Giddens 1999). Beck, who has analyzed modern society as risk society, looks for a solution that merges into a call for more opportunities for the public to engage in a more reflexive modernization. More recently Beck et al. (2003: 3) have claimed that—referring to Bruno Latour—the notion of reflexive modernization does not signify an "increase of mastery and consciousness, but a heightened awareness that mastery is impossible." Rather, reflexive modernization "disenchants and then dissolves its own taken-for-granted premises."

Giddens in turn calls for active trust relationships since "trust" would increasingly be the key to a functioning relationship between the wider society and different expert systems.

For studying the unexpected in contemporary societies, Portes plead the sociologists for “careful analyses of social processes or the awareness of their concealed and unintended manifestations” (Portes 2000: 15). The emphasis thus is still on the capacity of sociological research to fill gaps of knowledge with certainty and true results. Surprises that depart from a goal are—at least implicitly—seen as based on limited knowledge or error, and thus are perceived as a failure.

A concept of how the connection between the intended and the unintended or between knowledge and non-knowledge are to be conceptually framed, or how they are to be understood in the context of modern cultural achievements *in general*, is largely left out. By way of completion, in Simmel’s thought intended action and the side effects emerging from it or the production of new knowledge that can create new non-knowledge is understood as part of one recursive process. It is in this area that both Ross and Simmel can contribute to our understanding. I will argue that in this respect the views of Ross’ progressive sociology and Simmel’s formal approach are not only complementary, but also offer insights and fresh perspectives for our understanding of contemporary knowledge societies.

This aspect appears to be especially interesting, since in what today is understood as “knowledge society,” scientific uncertainties via unexpected results are increasingly becoming part of the wider society (Krohn and Weyer 1994). The notion of a knowledge society is often used to indicate the growing importance of expert knowledge as a structuring component in social relations and organization (Krohn 2001; Nowotny et al. 2001; Stehr 1994). However, thus perceived, knowledge does not grow in a linear and cumulative fashion; rather, new knowledge and new inventions always create new non-knowledge, that is, ever new gaps in knowledge which lead to further unintended consequences.³ This problematic, it will be contended, was already inherent in the thought of Simmel and Ross. Even more so, these authors’ reflections on what Simmel called the tragic tendencies and Ross termed the—sometimes decadent—transformations in modern life, deliver a more complete picture of the methodological aspects of unintended consequences in modern society’s development. I argue that their ideas on uncertainties in any form of social processes can serve as a model capable of enriching our understanding of the knowledge society or what Beck has labeled a reflexive modernization.

Simmel’s Constructive Sociology: Intellectual Meeting Points

Edward A. Ross (1866-1951) was one of the most influential American sociologists of his time. In 1888, two years after he graduated from Coe College, he traveled to Europe to study at the University of Berlin, where he remained for almost two years.⁴ In Berlin Ross began studying the philosophy of Hegel and especially the work of Kant. After the winter semester of 1888-1889 it became plain to him that his “profession was neither to be *Vergleichende Sprachkunde*⁵ nor philosophy.” Instead, during the following semester, he “sampled freely among the lecture rooms.” Besides seminars with the physicist Hermann von Helmholtz, historian Heinrich von Treitschke, political economist Adolph Wagner, physiologist Emil DuBois-Reymond, the philosophers Wilhelm Dilthey and Friedrich Paulsen, he favorably mentioned Georg Simmel, who in Ross’ words, was “destined to become a great constructive sociologist.”⁶ In the summer semester of 1889 Simmel taught two seminars, one in “Discussion of Selections from Kant,” the subtitle explaining that it “also serves as an introduction to philosophical studies.” The other course was entitled “Some Sections in Psychology with Special Reference to Sociological Problems.” It can be assumed

that Ross' description of Simmel as a "constructive sociologist" referred to the latter course.⁷ Much later, in 1909, Ross gave Simmel's *Soziologie* a highly favorable review and called the treatise "a great piece of construction" (Ross 1909: 673).

After Ross left Germany in the spring of 1890, he began his doctorate at Johns Hopkins University under Richard T. Ely. After finishing his doctoral work, he became Professor of Economics at Stanford University, a position that in 1893 was renamed "Professor of Sociology." Since Ross believed in the need for and importance of social reforms he understood the sociologist as working within science to help improve society. Accordingly, early on Ross got in trouble for his outspoken position on behalf of academic freedom and his political activism. After various ups and downs in 1900 he finally had to resign from Stanford University. After leaving Stanford he became the first Professor of Sociology at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, only to move on to the University of Wisconsin in Madison in 1906, where he remained at until his retirement in 1937.

In the opening chapters of his *Foundations of Sociology* (1905), a collection of articles published earlier during his time at Stanford and early years at Lincoln, Ross was searching for a "proper" sociological realm. In referring to Simmel's "The Problem of Sociology" (1895), Ross wrote: "most helpful is Simmel's notion that the true matter of sociology is not the groups themselves, but the *modes or forms* of associations into groups" (Ross 1905: 4; emphasis in original). Although Ross a little later (1905: 5) suggested that this "attractive area" should more suitably be labeled "social morphology," in his review of Simmel's *Soziologie* he again pointed out that Simmel had found an appropriate way to carve out a unique realm for the discipline of sociology, since the only realm that was left among the neighboring disciplines were "the modes of relation and modes of interaction involved in the associations of men for the advancing of their various interests." Ross went on to state: "Simmel sees here his opportunity and carves out his sociology by cutting right across the other social sciences" (Ross 1909: 673). Although Ross repeatedly referred favorably to Simmel in his writings it is nevertheless difficult to see direct affinities and similarities between Ross' sociological framework and Simmel's ideas.

This certainly has to do with the fact that European sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel (1858-1918) had little interest in using sociology as a tool for social reform and the betterment of society, something that Ross quite explicitly did. However, it is interesting to note that Simmel's most explicit statement for the practical usage of sociology was in the above mentioned article (1895) that Ross also referred to. At the end of the article, which discussed problems of terminology in sociology, Simmel pointed out that "the real question is to state problems and to solve them and not at all to discuss the names which we should give particular groups of them" (Simmel 1895: 420). Furthermore, Köhnke (1996) has convincingly shown, that Simmel in his private life did participate in social movements and was quite interested in ideas of reform. Leck (2000: Chapter 1) also demonstrates Simmel's willingness to link academic life with social critique. However, Simmel simply did not see *sociology's field* of endeavor as pivotally being connected with reform, but with the analysis of the "modes of interaction."

Furthermore, unlike Ross, Simmel held marginal positions in academia. Save for the last four years of his life when he became full professor in Straßburg, he only held the position of a "*Privatdozent*"⁸ and later the title of "*außerordentlicher Professor*" which was nothing more than an honorary professor. However, at the same time both Ross and Simmel were very popular representatives of their disciplines outside academia. Both were well known public lecturers who also published in popular journals and newspapers. Ross not only

worked as a journalist in the early 1890s, but his style of writing can often be said to be journalistic, as will become apparent later in the paper. Ross published almost 30 books, many of them intended to reach the general public.⁹

What made Simmel conceptually appealing for many American sociologists was that, departing from his Neo-Kantian thinking, he rejected organicist or natural determinist as well as purely culturalist or idealist ideas. Simmel did not see society as an entity or an organism as many of the late nineteenth-century sociologists did (see Simmel 1992: 13ff). His solution was to picture society as a web of reciprocal interactions (*Wechselwirkungen*). As already indicated in the quote from Ross above, Simmel defined the “matter” of sociology not as the study of society, community, nor even of groups, but the study of the *modes* and *forms* of “sociation” (*Vergesellschaftung*) or more literally of “societalization” (see Simmel 1895, 1910, 1989, 1992).

Furthermore, it is Simmel’s understanding of conflict and even more so his concept of tragedy in modern culture that connects his ideas to those of Ross. Simmel argued that conflict is a positive form of *Wechselwirkung* that leads to sociation. “Positive” here also meant that conflict allows a necessary portion of social life to form itself into what can be called a social unity. Unity, in Simmel’s view, again allows for expressions of conflict within groups of people. Since conflict thus can and should never be totally resolved, Simmel argued that social conflict and cooperation are just two sides of the same coin, and are a prerequisite for sociation (*Vergesellschaftung*). Conflicts are necessary elements to the development of the individual. This development in Simmel’s thinking is understood as performed between a tragic polarity following the immanent tendencies of a subject’s being (Bauer 1962: 28). It is in this context that Ross might have derived his ideas on conflict, social control, and—more important in this context—his take on decadent tendencies in society from Simmel’s thought.¹⁰

Ever since Ross’ book *Social Control* (1916), the notion of control has remained pivotal in the social sciences, although its meanings have changed over time. In Ross’ treatise social control referred to regulation capacities that lead to certain group compositions. This broadly included all social practices and arrangements that contribute to order and conformity (Coser 1982). It is this perspective which shifts Ross’ focus away from studying society or groups themselves, but—in a Simmelian fashion—to the forms that lead to groups, and thus to order and conformity. However, the instrumentalist meaning of social control that Ross was including spurred sociologists’ interest in using their knowledge to direct reform projects. This diverged somewhat from Simmel’s idea of the descriptive and analytic scope of sociology. Here, Ross was positioning himself against the *laissez faire* political philosophy prominent in the writings of many of his contemporaries. He pointed out that unchecked economic growth and cultural development would inevitably have unintended negative consequences, and that society needs to be aware of these.

Leaving Ross’ and Simmel’s ideas on the scope of sociology for the moment, in the following section I will turn to the notion of tragedy and decadence in both authors’ writings. Tragedy and decadence is reflected in the pessimism of their ideas on contemporary culture and society as well as their view of the drift of modern history.

Tragedy and Decadence: Simmel and Ross on Modern Society

In Aristotle’s idea of plays that he labeled “tragedies,” the hero acted reasonably and righteously, but nevertheless in such a way as to cause his own downfall and to contribute to his own destruction. From the vantage point of a broader understanding of the word trag-

edy, the word decadence, with its etymological roots in the Latin de-cadere, “to fall away,” has a meaning that overlaps with this notion. From the time of Montesquieu to the academic-conservative context of nineteenth century literature in France, “décadence” was used almost exclusively with reference to the decline of the Roman Empire. Since the later nineteenth century however, the word “decadence” has come to be used with ever greater frequency to refer to all moments in history which are believed to have “fallen away” from earlier, higher standards of development.

For Simmel, the conflict of individualism versus the group is central to any definition of decadence and also of tragedy. Simmel wrote that

the individual's instinct for self-preservation demands very different actions and powers than the self-preservation of the group, so that self-preservation of the individual sometimes can be unscathed (*unbeschädigt*) and successful, while at the same time the group can be weak and fragmented; conversely, the latter may present itself in its full strength, even when its individual elements may already have reached a state of decadence” (Simmel 1992: 558).¹¹

Admittedly, Simmel used the notion of decadence most often when referring to Friedrich Nietzsche (most forcefully: Simmel 1907: 195-232). Especially Nietzsche's *The Birth of the Tragedy* (1993) had an impact on Simmel's usage of the notion of tragedy. However, although both authors saw the origin of tragedy in processes of rationality and differentiation in modern society, Nietzsche's interpretation of tragedy (and also of decadence) nevertheless was based on two divided processes: One was the downfall of the old aristocratic culture, the other the development of a new culture. By contrast, in Simmel's thought the downfall of the old and the arrival of the new are understood as parts of one process (Lichtblau 1984: 254). More specifically, to Simmel the trend of modern society appeared as a progressive liberation of the individual from the bonds of exclusive attachment and personal dependencies in earlier, more rural societies or “communities.” This development, however, took place on the basis of the increasing oppression of individuals by products of their own creation. Life in the city in particular is associated with a “sensory overload” (*höchste Nervenleistung*) on the individual, a concept which Simmel used as a touchstone for his analysis of modern society (Simmel 1903: 194). An important cause of this sensory overload is the reliance upon the money economy, which tends to pull exchange out of particular contexts because everything can be translated into economic value.

Accordingly, in the *Philosophy of Money* (1900) Simmel also suggests that under capitalism the products of culture are separated from concrete human activity, and come to confront human beings as objective and unintended forces.¹² To Simmel money is the core symbol of this process (1900: Chapter 6). At the same time the urban environment and the money economy assure the individual of a huge amount of personal freedom. However, for all the increased opportunities that the modern metropolis can offer, in the final analysis it can only partially improve life; for in the end, the improvements that the money economy generates do nothing more than signal the possibility of even greater improvements. Consequently this only leads to the insight that more improvements lead merely to further non-knowledge which has to be turned into new knowledge for further improvements. In other words, metropolitan life symbolizes a never-ending process where unintended side effects gradually can become so aggravating that social development is in danger of grinding to a halt.¹³

The two opposing tendencies in the modern metropolis that Simmel detects are: (1) a development towards the impersonal, which is based on what he called the money economy where everything is interchangeable; and (2) the development towards more individuality

based on an increased division of labor, which goes hand in hand with a greater need to differentiate oneself. The result is that what he called objective culture becomes separated from subjective culture and the newly gained autonomy of the individual becomes increasingly attenuated. Simmel wrote: "as objective culture I understand the things which lead the soul to its own fulfillment or which resemble the stretch of ways that the individual or a group take on the path to a higher level (*Dasein*). Under subjective culture I understand the actual state of development of people" (Simmel 1993: 90; see also Simmel 1918). Thus one of the main interests of Simmel was to detect the possibilities and the capacity of human society to use, absorb, and transform elements of objective culture. However, this objective culture can come to develop into opposition to the subjective forces. This, in Simmel's writings, is the tragic conflict which permeates all domains of modern society. Lewis Coser indeed believes that Simmel was caught up in a "tragic vision of culture" (1977: 193). However, as will become clearer further below, Simmel evaluated the surprising and unexpected events that develop out of the objectification of subjective culture not universally as negative.

Individuals living in a society attain cultivation by appropriating the cultural values that surround them, but at the same time these values threaten to subjugate social developments. The tragedy arises from the intrinsic character of culture itself, which consists in a predetermined rupture between the objective and subjective products of human achievements. Since the rift between subjective and objective culture is increasing, the chances for growth and betterment can be but not must be decreasing. It was in this direction that Simmel also argued when he discussed Nietzsche's notion of decadence. In Simmel's perspective "the meeting point of the idea of development with the axiomatic calling of every human value for the *highest* element, that which produces in its result all types of social locomotion, in a democratic sense is decadence, that is, the loss of the instincts for growth and enhancement" (1907: 228). Consequently, in an essay entitled "The Notion and Tragedy of Culture" (orig. 1911, revised 1923) Simmel analyzed the evolution of cultural development as tragic, since cultural achievements may, with increasing progress, appear as uncontrollable "objective" powers which sometimes lead to decadent or downward tendencies. He expressed his concern that, in the process of industrial production, side products might well evolve. This evolutionary development in turn also produces senseless new needs, in both the sciences and in technological developments. An example of Simmel's with reference to the autonomous development of modern science is that although "no one would find it useful to drill for coal or gas anywhere in the world at random" the possibilities in scientific methods might drive someone to proceed in that way, since the chances that something could be found is given in the character of modern scientific research. He furthermore criticized that in this process of "industrial production the development of by-products can be suggested, that are essentially unneeded, but the force to fully use the possibilities of research is demonstrated by the driving force of modern scientific methodologies" (1998: 213-214). Simmel called the modern drive to search for new knowledge for knowledge's sake, which time and again only produces new non-knowledge, a search for "dispensable knowledge," knowledge that has been detached from subjective needs. In his view, science thus creates a "need" for setting into force new scientific activities. Science thus creates non-knowledge, via the proliferation of new gaps in knowledge. Furthermore, scientific innovation also creates unintended by-products from the autonomous expansion of scientific activities. Simmel went on to elucidate that this senseless driving force behind modern means of knowledge production stemmed from a tragic relation inherent in all cultural development:

A tragic relation—which is different from a sad one or one that is destructive from the outside—is what we propose as a label in the following case: If the destructive forces that are directed against a being (*Wesen*) stem from the inner nature (*tiefsten Schichten*) of that very being; if with its destruction an ideal is fulfilled that is given in its inner tendencies and follows a logical development of its inner structure that originally was the being's own creation for positive development (Simmel 1998: 215).

Hence, Simmel neither saw this tragedy as stemming solely from capitalism, as in the writings of Marx, nor from bureaucracy alone, as Weber had argued. Simmel contended instead that it was an inescapable aspect of social development in general, and had multiple causes. In short, humans produce social or cultural forms and then become estranged from them, be it via new technological developments (1998: 213), the morphing of the natural environment (1998: 121), new cultural achievements like the money economy (1900, 1903), or the expansion of scientific activities (1998: 214).

However, Simmel also mentions beneficial unintended consequences arising out of the creation of objective culture. This possibility he most forcefully offered when discussing the objective character of buildings or human induced changes in nature (e.g., gardening). Sometimes, the conversion into something completely different and uncontrollable is even desired, because, what is made by human skill can also become “unintentionally and unenforceably something obviously new, that is often even more beautiful and more consistent than what has been intended.” In his book on religion (1912), Simmel observes that the natural world around us “excites us sometimes to aesthetic enjoyment, sometimes to fright and horror, and gives us a feeling for the sublimity of her force.” Quite often there is only a fine line between the evaluation of an “objective” outcome as positive or negative, as “enjoyment” or “shock” (1912: 19). Using the example of patina on wood, metal, ivory, or marble, Simmel continued and called this the “mysterious harmony … which cannot be wholly accounted for by analyzing our perception of it” (Simmel 1998: 121).¹⁴

Thus, on the one hand Simmel understood individualization as progress and he still believed that the cultivation of the material environment could lead to the common good of society. On the other hand, Simmel was very much aware that the world outside of the human individual may develop its own dynamics, which have negative as well as positive unintended side effects. Subjective and objective culture are two sides of the same coin, or in Simmel's words: “Apparently there can be no subjective culture without an objective one, since the development or a condition of a subject is only culture, in that he or she has included objects in its path of development.” A little later he added that “especially in highly developed epochs with a pronounced division of labor the achievements of culture grow together into a realm of their own” (Simmel 1993: 90-91). Thus, although the division of labor enriches cultural life, at the same time it can also enslave the individual. In other words, Simmel sees that individuals cannot escape from participating in subjective culture, yet then face the ever more limiting consequences of objective culture which have been derived from the creative processes of subjective culture. “The cultivation of the subjects cannot raise in the same degree” (Simmel 1993: 91) as does objective culture. Simmel felt that the forces of objective culture were too deeply enmeshed to be overcome, since it develops following its own “natural” logic. Even more concisely, Simmel stated that the subjective culture, “in the face of the tremendous expansion of the objective culture, which is divided into an uncountable number of working skills, *cannot* raise itself at all” (Simmel 1993: 91). Subjective culture thus also consists of the intensity of participation in objective culture. Elsewhere he remarked that “as soon as the human-made work is completed, it not only has an objective being and an individual existence independent of humans, but it also holds in its being … *strengths* and *weaknesses*, components and significances, that we are

completely innocent of and which often take us by surprise" (Simmel 1998: 213; emphasis added). In that sense, objective culture is identified by a reality that departs qualitatively from expectation; and when human action has produced a result, this may even be the opposite of that actually intended. This perspective is expressed as an organizing principle in Simmel's entire writings. However, as has been discussed further above, this does not necessarily mean that surprises must be negative. It is simply a part of a perennial cycle of modern cultural development. Simmel's description of the course of modern societies thus appears as a similar, but certainly also as much more elegant and appropriate than, for instance, Giddens' talk of the "juggernaut of modernity."

Unlike Simmel, Edward A. Ross seldom used the term "tragic" or even any notion of "tragedy" in his writings, but he frequently talked about social decadence, and also, interchangeably, about decay, deterioration, or the destructive forces that are inherent in any form of societal development. In speaking of the "deterioration of social structures," Ross believed that such structures are "made up of people, yet it would be rash to assume that they can have no tendencies of their own" (Ross 1920: 300). The more rapidly society changes, Ross believed, the sooner it develops away from its firm structures (*ibid.*: 310). Even more so, in his *Social Psychology* (orig. 1908), he described the city and its inhabitants in a fashion strongly reminiscent of Simmel. He wrote: "Freed from the hampering net of kin and class ties, the individual appears. The city is, therefore, a hotbed, where seed ideas quickly germinate. Its progressive population naturally places itself at the head of the social procession and sets the pace for the slower country dwellers" (Ross 1919: 181). A few pages on, summing up, he ascertains that the

city is fed constantly with superior immigrants in the active period, who reciprocally emancipate and stimulate one another. Wherever they may have originated, most cultural treasures find their way to the general population by way of the city. Owing to the civilization it contributes or communicates, a presumption of superiority comes at last to attach to everything urban. The splendor of visible consumption in the city, and the more attractive aspect of its work, lend the city a glamour (*ibid.*: 194).

Although Ross believed, much like Simmel, that the course of societal development was marked by the gradual replacement of external constraint by inner disciplines that in a democratic society would lead to freedom, he nevertheless saw increasing tendencies towards decadence, rooted in a wide range of mechanisms that he linked directly to the development of capitalism, and especially the possessors of great wealth (see Ross 1920: 531-534). In this context Ross went on to remind the sociologist to recognize that there are "in social life a variety of processes which arise from diverse conditions, obey different laws, and have dissimilar effects" (Ross 1905: 95). For Ross, following Simmel, sociology should incorporate units of analysis that lend themselves to empirical examination and the discovery of reciprocal causation. In mapping the sociological field, Ross categorized three kinds of processes which he called: (1) the preliminary processes, (2) the social processes, and (3) the reconstructive or dynamic processes. The products of society are continually re-created by these three principal processes (Ross 1905: 95-99). The first of these types of processes that Ross detects, the "preliminary processes," include the natural or geographical surroundings and their effects on human communities. The second group he called the "processes of socialization," which differentiate and segregate groups of people. The final group, the reconstructive or dynamic processes, are, Ross maintains, the outcome of the other two, and should, for this reason, never be considered in isolation. Ross' "reconstructive processes" are those that often produce unintended changes via technological developments, over-exploitation of natural resources, or human-induced natural activities. In these processes, which

work in a similar way like Simmel's objectified cultural forms, yet another difference to Merton's and others analysis of "unintended consequences" can be seen. In Merton's understanding, for instance, no natural or technological nor any other sort of "objectified" material influences or "serendipities" are to be found.¹⁵

In the context of human induced natural changes Ross frequently tackled the problem of overpopulation and the scarcity of natural resources.¹⁶ For him there is a close relationship between demographical changes via immigration or unchecked human population growth and the rise of unintended side effects. Thus one of the most important measures Ross believes modern society has in order to stop itself from "decadent tendencies" is to slow or halt the growth of the human population and restrict immigration to the United States.

However, for Ross even constructive and well-planned cultural activities can have, as he put it, "incidental or side effects." They "leave behind them as by-products a permanent effect, and in time these effects must accumulate until they strain and warp social structures" (Ross 1905: 200). Ross' perception is that the progressive developments in modern society eventually strike back against society (Ross 1905: 91-95). He believed that the very traits that had made American society so successful could potentially also be its undoing. It is interesting to note that Ross, in his "map of the sociological field" (1905: 98), subdivided the outcomes of the above mentioned threefold processes into two types of products: the subjective and the objective. Although he is not very clear by what he means by the two categories, the examples he lists partially fit into Simmel's cluster between objective and subjective cultures. For Ross subjective products range from ideas, arts, sciences, beliefs, knowledge, desires to mandates, and institutions. Under objective products he includes relations (e.g., friendship, slavery, or patronage) or different groupings (e.g., crowds, castes, or corporations). For Simmel the subjective level was mainly concerned with the human ability to handle and improve the objective culture, such as in the arts or the sciences. In general, however, Ross and Simmel seem to agree. Ross believed that objective products "precede the individual and they survive him.... Nevertheless, they have all risen at some time out of the actions and interactions of men. To understand their genesis we must ascend to that primordial facts known as *the social process*" (ibid.: 90-91).

In this view, human societies remain immersed in dynamic social and natural processes even as they seemingly control them, since the subjective products as the outcome of these different processes lead to the objective products which in turn again can influence and—at worst—destroy social processes (Ross 1905: Chapter 8). Ross thus calls for agencies that oppose and counteract "decadent tendencies" and plead for the "strengthening of directive influences" (Ross 1920: 522). In this respect Ross held a very clear idea of the unexpected. Unexpected events are always rated as negative, because they deviate from the "right" path of social planning. Ross was convinced that a modern democratic society needed advice from experts and interventionist policies.¹⁷ He believed that politicians, newspapers, and other agencies could use sociological knowledge about social regularities to give direction for social guidance or control.

In his *Principles of Sociology* (1920) in particular he named numerous examples of these "processes with dynamic by-products" that, he asserted, lead to ceaseless accumulation of capital and social decadence.¹⁸ Ross observed that "willed social changes" increasingly lag behind the "unwilled" or "unintended changes" (Ross 1920: 526-528; 541-545). The unintended changes Ross called transmutations. Very generally, he defined transmutations as "changes of an involuntary character due to the difficulty one generation has in accurately reproducing the copy set by its predecessor" (1920: 526).¹⁹ He furthermore points out that "human institutions and relations likewise glide insensibly into forms which would not be

TABLE 1
The Unintended Consequences of Modernity

	Georg Simmel	Edward A. Ross
Negative Side effects	Decadence, uncontrollable “objective” forces, “the tragedy of culture”	Decadence, decay, deterioration of social structures
Positive Side effects	Unexpected beauty and consistency, resubjectivation	—

assumed of intention” (*ibid.*). These “unwilled social changes,” or, as he sometimes also called them, “the accumulation of byproducts,” “unobserved alterations,” or “unintended metamorphoses,” are to be understood as “naturally” occurring in *any* developed society. This conclusion can be drawn since in all his writings, Ross, to empirically back up his theory of uncertainties in societal change, delivered examples from vastly different corners of the earth as well as from different epochs in the history of civilization, including ancient Greece and Rome.

The Rift in Modern Society’s Development

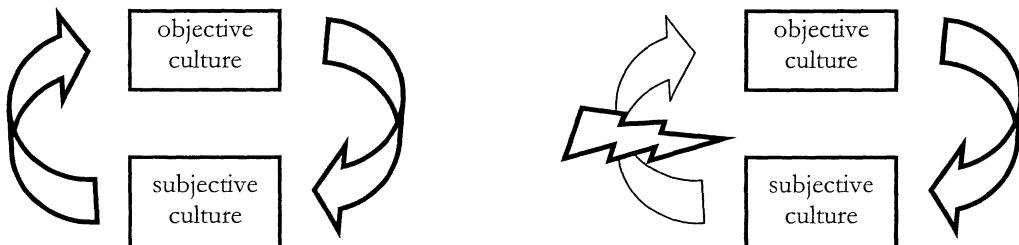
In both Ross and Simmel’s idea of the trend of modern history the notion was present that social development is orchestrated by the interplay between two disparate parts. What in Ross’ thought was conscious planning versus the growing number of unintended side effects of modern society resulting from its industrial means of production and its modern scientific research, was for Simmel the idea of a widening rift between subjective and objective culture. Objective culture had been created by people and was intended for people, but it had attained a “naturalistic” form which followed its own logic of development, potentially even beneficial. Put differently, every solution to a problem or any plan of invention can, recursively, also become the cause of new problems as well as a confluence into something much better than the original goal. Although in Simmel’s reflections the unexpected can also lead to positive outcomes, beneficial unintended consequences in Ross’ writings can hardly be found (Table 1).

Since Ross’ doctrine of social change implied multiple causation, including both natural processes and social progress, it also included the permanent, ongoing public and political reflection on the consequences of, for instance, the division of labor, the ceaseless accumulation of capital, degradation of the natural environment, and the development of new technologies (Ross 1905: 182–255; 1916: 21). His catalogue of the consequences of modern life was drawn from his extensive travels around the world, which provided him with firsthand data by means of which to compare problems in different types of societies (Spellman 1979). Although Simmel did not travel nearly as extensively, Ross nevertheless praised Simmel’s work for being based “not on an *a priori* philosophy, but on primary observation, reinforced by wide researches into the history of particular associations” (Ross 1909: 673). Thus, empirical research was a quality that Ross also valued in Simmel.

However, although Simmel also believed in beneficial side effects of modern life, his posture towards tendencies in modern life allegedly made him more pessimistic about human society than many of his contemporaries, including Ross. At first sight Simmel’s take on modern history appears to be very similar to Ross’ warnings of decadent tendencies, since both authors share a certain fundamental pessimism. Simmel’s writings on the tragic aspect of human lives do certainly reflect an attitude more characteristic of Europe and

FIGURE 1

The Ideal-Type of a Recursive Process between Objective and Subjective Culture (left) and the Rupture in Modern Society (right)



especially Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while Ross' more optimistic attitude would be more typical of the United States in the same period. However, at the same time it is striking how in Ross' analysis his optimism is always interrupted, claiming that American society was on the eve of an upheaval indicated by decadent tendencies of all kinds and that in Simmel's idea unexpected consequences can be called positive. Thus, in their analysis of modern society one could say that Simmel and Ross departed from different platforms—Ross rather optimistic and Simmel more pessimistic—but they nevertheless arrived at similar conclusions. However, as noted above, Simmel felt that objective culture involved processes in which objects seemed to take on a “natural” life of their own, sometimes dominating the human society that created them, sometimes delivering delight and pleasure. Over time, humankind can be increasingly coerced by this objective culture. Taking this argument full circle, the production and consumption of objective culture tend to whittle away capacities for human action. The influence of the human individual to determine if his or her “management” of objective culture lead to a delightful or rather a tragic outcome, has been minimized. One could thus conclude that success or failure simply become a question of fate. While Simmel saw the intensification of objective culture as a universal phenomenon in all cultural epochs, he felt that in modern societies and especially the modern metropolis it tends to become evermore encumbering.

Understood in this way, Simmel's position at first sight might appear as identical to Marx's definition of “alienation.” It also sounds much like Durkheim's concept of anomie or Weber's rationalization. However, Simmel further reflected on how modern society can successfully deal with these developments so that a recursive closure between objective and subjective culture can lead to a progressive development.²⁰ Simmel thus did not have such a pessimistic perception of modern society as had Weber and Marx. Furthermore, Simmel did not relate the relationship between subjective and objective culture to the issue of class in the way that Marx did. When Simmel talks about modern society, he understands this as a projective surface for rehearsing his thoughts on the connection between objective and subjective culture, thus sharpening his understanding of the development of the two sides of modernity (see Papilloud 2003). He was not universally pessimistic, since although he identified a tragedy of culture, he also saw the potential to learn from the unexpected and tragic outcomes of human activities in modern culture, so that in a new phase of “subjective culture” revisions and modifications to “objective” issues could be undertaken (see Figure 1).

In a series of articles that were published in 1909 on the question of “the future of our culture” in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, Simmel contributed with an essay on the pessimism deriving from the rift between objective and subjective culture (1909: 2-3).²¹ Here Simmel

calls humans “cultivated” when objective culture is recursively linked to subjective culture so that “both develop in harmony” (1909: 2). He then goes on to show that “different historical epochs have emphasized on their cultural tasks (*Kulturaufgabe*), sometimes more the increase of the objective goods, sometimes more the qualification of individuals, so that the latter will constitute the subjective condition, which alone indicates the final sense of culture” (1909: 3). Simmel now believes that cultural policy is only able to aim at the subjective factor, that is, to improve the individuals’ possibilities to narrow or—ideally—even close the rift between subjective and objective culture. Simmel addressed a concrete example on how this should be handled: The education of the youth. He proposed that “it would be important to prepare the student for the contemporary cultural world.” Instead, he says, the education system would mix up the standing afar from something (*Fernstehen*) with the “view from above” or, more literally, to stand above something (*Darüberstehen*). The grasping and incorporating of objective culture thus needs a sublime *Darüberstehen* instead of a view from afar. Students, Simmel continued, would for instance have to “learn to compare the Peloponnesian War with the second Punic War” or “maybe can provide information on the sequence of the Platonic dialogues. But the skills (*Handhaben*) for the acquisition and processing of the political and artistic, the ethical and scientific cultural values of the present, as well as for the understanding of the cultural spirit that crystallizes itself in the current law, in literature, and the competing world views (*kämpfende Weltanschaungen*), are lacking.” In short, Simmel criticized the youth as being unworldly and living in an ivory tower. He thus called for a more practice-oriented education. However, he then summarized, that cultural policy can only lessen this discrepancy “by fostering the capacity of individuals to turn the contents of objective culture, which [they] experience, more effectively (*besser und schneller*) than heretofore into the material of subjective culture” (1909: 3).

This even more points directly to Ross’ idea of interventionist policies and his belief in the need for advice from experts. To be sure, Simmel’s hesitation to fully believe in state intervention, however, in turn was compensated by his belief in the possibility of positive side effects. The close connection between Simmel’s conception of the relation between objective and subjective culture allows to feed back both positive as well as negative experiences into the next step in the development of modern society, that is, the social ability to produce and understand objective culture.

To sum this up: the rift that Simmel describes is constituted via the individual’s influence from objective culture, which is independent of individual existence. At the same time, however, the individual transcends these objective cultural forms again. In other words, objective culture delivers the tools for the individual—most prominently in the modern metropolis—to use his/her subjective ideas in order to become a social being. As objective culture becomes more complex and elaborated, it becomes increasingly difficult to absorb it into subjective culture again or even to evade it. The problem that Simmel sensed in modern development was that an imbalance between objective and subjective culture occurs, leading to a rift, so that the recursive process between objective and subjective culture is interrupted. To that end, Simmel delivered a fundamental mode for framing the unexpected in modern society.

Outlook: Action and Non-knowledge in Modern Societies

Taking Simmel and Ross’ ideas together illustrates how social reform and deliberate action cannot be understood in isolation from unexpected societal developments. These two

sides are not alternative ways of understanding society, but rather features of every form of sociation, and are recursively dependent on one another. In this sense both authors saw the true challenge of a discipline called sociology. In their view sociology had to take the perspective that societal phenomena—or forms of sociation—must be explained in terms of deliberate constructive activities *together* with “natural” or unintended developments. Put more succinctly, the conflict between subjective and objective culture can be seen as a meaningful prerequisite to the sociological understanding of modern societies’ paths of development.

From this viewpoint, the idea of a knowledge society as discussed above could deliver us a more complete picture of social development if we knitted it together with Ross and Simmel’s thought, that is, the idea that deliberate production of cultural objects—whether knowledge for scientific innovation, social reform, or any other purpose—must always lead to new side effects or unintended consequences, or, one could say, to the creation of further non-knowledge. In other words, in the analysis and understanding of society, one has to acknowledge the presence of non-knowledge by taking unknown processes into account. The admission of non-knowledge in the development of new scientific achievements or artistic creations would also balance out the naïve approach of the traditional idea of scientific knowledge, which is understood as referring to known processes and their influences upon known variables. Put at its most succinct, non-knowledge has to be admitted in knowledge production. This is in agreement with Florian Znaniecki’s (1940: 5–8) classical assertion that the sociologist must refrain from making pronouncements about the truth of any knowledge system. Instead, and here Simmel and Ross’ ideas again deliver some guidance, sociology could help to uncover the limits of knowledge instead of deciding which of the existing pools of knowledge is more correct than others.

In Simmel and Ross’ understanding of the development of modern society these two aspects were indeed understood as part of one complex. To overcome fundamental misunderstandings of societal developments—whether by practitioners, scientists, sociologists, or plain citizens—it appears important to acknowledge that uncertainties via the “incidental or side effects” of any social activity (technological, artistic, ecological, or otherwise) are not to be understood as mistakes and signs of incompleteness, but as probable and perhaps even unavoidable. The relation between knowledge and its side effects via non-knowledge must be considered as constitutive for one another. The observation of such recursively dependent processes and relations between—to use Simmel’s terms—subjective and objective culture, as well as sketching possibilities for the easing of tensions between the two sides of the coin, could be a promising subject for sociology in the twenty-first century. To this end, Simmel and Ross outlined a way in which meaningful human activities can be understood as part of their unintended consequences and vice versa.

Notes

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- 1. Although Simmel’s influence was strong in the early Chicago tradition (see Gross 2001a, 2001b), and in its extensions in the works of Everett Hughes, Louis Wirth, and Erving Goffman, several authors have analyzed Simmel’s exclusion from the “canon” of U.S. sociology after World War II especially during the Parsonsian hegemony (see Levine et al. 1976; Levine 1988; Jaworski 1997). For recent studies on Parsons and Simmel, see Nichols (2001) and Levine (2000). Places like Yale (under William G. Sumner), Columbia (Franklin Giddings), Minnesota (F. Stuart Chapin), and Harvard (Pitirim Sorokin, Talcott Parsons) either did not emphasize Simmel or else perceived his work as philosophy rather than social science.

2. The term non-knowledge is a literal translation of the German *Nichtwissen*, which denotes that there can be knowledge (*Wissen*) about what is not known. The English word ignorance that is normally used to refer to the opposite of knowledge does not imply this symmetry (Krohn and van den Daele 1998: 218,n3). In a different sense, Machlup (1962: 16) used the term non-knowledge to indicate that which is not knowledge, e.g., assumptions or beliefs. For Simmel's usage of the notion of non-knowledge see his discussion in Simmel (1992: 388–394).
3. Suggestions that in contemporary societies "knowledge" is, in one way or another, increasing in importance have been put forward for some time now. See e.g., Bell (1973), Drucker (1969), Lane (1966), Lopata (1976), Machlup (1962), Price (1961), or the classical studies of Park (1940) and Znaniecki (1940). However, these early attempts seem to differ from more recent discussions in that they mainly use "knowledge" synonymously with "information" or "news" and thus tackle problems of new information technologies or the enormous increase and distribution in theoretical knowledge rather than the importance of unintended side effects in modern knowledge production. For a discussion of some of the above mentioned authors in relation to today's debates on the knowledge society, see Stehr (1994: Chapter 1) as well as the contributions in Böhme and Stehr (1986).
4. Unless otherwise indicated, biographical information on Ross has been taken from McMahon (1999), Ross (1936), Weinberg (1972), as well as the archives of the *State Historical Society of Wisconsin* in Madison.
5. Today this would come closest to "comparative philology."
6. These quotes from Ross can be found in Fuhrman (1980: 160). Fuhrman retrieved this information from the Luther L. Bernard Papers at Pennsylvania State University (see Fuhrman 1980: 247). This is from a draft of a never-published volume of autobiographical statements by American sociologists that Bernard began to put together in the later 1920s.
7. A complete list of courses given by Simmel can be found in the appendix of Gassen and Landmann (1958).
8. There is no English equivalent to the German title *Privatdozent*. A *Privatdozent* is a lecturer who can be but not must be a member of the salaried university staff. The title *Privatdozent* is given to a scholar with a Ph.D., who has written his habilitation, normally a second monograph after the Ph.D. dissertation. Despite attempts to establish alternatives, until today, the habilitation in most cases is still the key prerequisite to apply for full professorship at a German university.
9. One area of Ross' popular ideas was his outspoken nativism. See e.g. the respective chapters in McMahon (1999), Vidich and Lyman (1985), and Weinberg (1972). That nativism to Ross was not synonymous with racism can be seen in Ross (1936: 276; 1901: 67; 1905: 353–384).
10. See here for instance Ross (1920: 158; 161), where he explicitly referred to Simmel in his discussion of the importance of conflict, as well as Ross (1905: 118–119) on differentiation and specialization of the "social mass" and even more so in Ross (1905: 265–266), where he discusses Simmel's concept of the causes of the persistence of groups (Simmel 1898). In the appended bibliography of his chapter on "Recent Tendencies in Sociology" (pp. 256–352, esp. 349) he also listed Simmel's tripartite article on "The Persistence of Social Groups" (1887/98) and Simmel's *On Social Differentiation* (1898, orig. 1890).
11. This and the following quotes from German sources are my own translations.
12. For an excellent comparison of Simmel's analyses of money with the money-writings of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, see Deflem (2003).
13. As Stehr has repeatedly (e.g., 1994: 160; 262) pointed out, Simmel felt that a general rise in the level of knowledge in modern society does not mean a general leveling between those who know or do not know, but rather leads to new forms of social inequalities.
14. One is tempted to compare this with what Kurt Wolff (2003: 44) called with reference to Simmel's reflections of the love for a certain landscape, the "surrender to a landscape," where the subjective love is repeated by the landscape itself. On the theoretical importance of Simmel's discussion of the unintended—and often delightful—consequences of human observation of and intervention into the natural world, see Gross (2003: 95–102; 153–178).
15. The fact that the phenomena of the material world and the relationship between them have been seen as invariant has been discussed as a general problem in the sociology of science and knowledge beginning with the writings of Karl Mannheim in the 1920s to current "science studies." On this aspect see e.g. Mulkay (1979: 11–13; 27–29), Woolgar (1983), Guggenheim and Nowotny (2003) as well as the discussions in Ihde and Selinger (2003). For a symbolic interactionist perspective on the material world, see Weigert (1997).
16. See e.g. Ross (1905, chap. 8; 1911; 1926; 1927a; 1927b; 1934). On the general importance of ecological thought in the work of Ross, see Gross (2002). Of course, population growth was a central topic also

- among European sociologists, perhaps best known in the writings on the division of labor by Durkheim (1933). Contrary to both Ross and Simmel, Durkheim had a much more positive understanding of the division of labor, since, as he believed, it was fostering “organic solidarity,” which was able to produce consensus, the basis of social solidarity. For an enlightening discussion on the question whether Durkheim’s concept of organic solidarity in the light of twenty-first century problems like further demographic increase and natural resource depletion can still be seen a sufficient binding force, see Catton (2002).
17. Here Ross followed his mentor Lester F. Ward (1841–1913), who supported government intervention and social reform projects as a prerequisite to promoting social progress. Ward believed that through the best possible education for all members of a society, humanity could direct social evolution (Ward 1903, see also Tanner and Tanner 1987). Ross and Ward both saw the discipline of sociology of importance for social reforms and believed that sociological knowledge and expertise should be used to attain a better society. Ward and Simmel also knew each other. The correspondence between Ward and Simmel is located in the John Hay Library at Brown University. Simmel for instance discusses his plans with Ward to launch a *Journal of Sociology* (Simmel to Ward, 24. February 1893). I am grateful to Christian Papilloud for making these documents available to me.
 18. In a Simmelian manner Ross for instance noted: “The digging of the precious metals transforms society by making them in time so plentiful that the ‘money economy’ supersedes the ‘natural economy’” (Ross 1920: 520). An earlier version of the chapter on “social decadence” can be found in Ross (1918).
 19. This definition of the “involuntary character” of transmutations can already be found in Ross (1905: 204–205).
 20. In that respect, and unlike his contemporary Max Weber, Simmel could be called quite “American.” That the fear of a coming crisis coupled with a still optimistic outlook can go together in American sociology is also vividly represented in the work of Pitirim Sorokin (1941), a friend and collaborator of Ross (see Nichols 1996; 1997). But see the classical observation of American essayist Henry Adams (1918: Chapter 34) who, in 1904, concluded that modern life does not allow the teacher to show the students how to act, but only how “to teach reaction” against the oppressing complexities of the 20th century.
 21. I here quote from the original publication of this essay from the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, since the reprint in Simmel (1993) is a shortened version of this. I again thank Christian Papilloud for making the original as well as the other contributors’ essays in this debate on “the future of our culture” available to me. Some of the other authors in the debate were Peter Altenberg, Peter Behrens, Karl Lamprecht, Helene Lange, Friedrich Naumann, and Bertha von Suttner. I also thank Judith Wittner of Loyola University Chicago for discussing these themes with me.

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