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Patrick Watier, Matthieu Amat and Emanuela Mora

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Article abstract

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PATRICK WATIER

Philosophy, Cultural Philosophy and Sociology

Abstract. *Every sociology rests on representations that are not explicitly thematised, and are in concordance with an atmosphere and cultural formations. These representations correspond to what Panofsky called a mental habit. which is transferable from one field of activity or thought to another. The essay shows how both the themes of individuality and of Bildung play back on G. Simmel's conception and place of the "social" and, consequently, on his sociological view.*

Introduction

Over the course of his career, G. Simmel has dealt with many themes in philosophy and sociology, offering for philosophy what he called a spirit attitude: a philosophical culture. To clarify this last point, I will question this attitude: how does it relate to culture? What is Simmel's definition of culture? I will seek to show the role that his conception has played in the way in which he treats the relations between society, the individual and humanity. Obviously this same conception has many implications for the place he gives to individuality, social and humanity as categories.

To fully grasp his conception of culture, it should first be noted that self-understanding requires the passage through the objective mind: it condenses knowledge, modes of making, artistic representations, techniques, scientific theories, whose appropriation makes it possible to cultivate oneself and become a particular individual. This active appropriation limits the determination of the individual by historical forces and existing cultural formations. In this way, we can try to see how it reacts to the two 19th century forms of types of violence identified by Simmel, namely nature and

history. These two acts of violence which are directed at individual sovereignty will be dealt with in particular in the essay entitled "Michel Ange", but the same theme is found in the preface to the second edition of "Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie": "subjecting the mind to the same necessity as the fall of the stone or stem that pushes, or reducing itself to managing the history of the species" (Simmel, 1997: 230).

If Simmel attributes certain evils to history, in the sense that it would confine the action to a simple, determined reproduction, then we could undoubtedly suggest that what we call social is equally targeted when it appears as a general cause and that, for example, social conditions are supposed to be able to account for any cultural or artistic phenomenon. Simmel's conception includes what might be called an anti sociological sociology, since he considers that personality, art and even science cannot be exhausted by their social determinants. When Foucault says "that we must free ourselves from the sacralisation of the social, and stop considering this essential thing in human life and in human relations, I mean the thought considered as smoke" (1994: 597), it seems to me that we are aiming at the same opponent. But before tackling these themes and seeing how Simmel was situated, I will present what seems to me to be more commonly understood in his conception of culture.

Simmel's approach to culture is based on several registers: in "The Philosophy of Money", it is about seeing the consequences of monetary economics and the division of labour on modern culture; the texts of the war period - "The Conflict of Modern Culture", published between July 31 and August 6, 1918, "The Crisis of Culture" of 1916. Of course, the text on the cultural tragedy of 1911, which is also explicitly based on "The Philosophy of Money", and the concrete historical examples developed there, are central, but we must also think of all the monographs devoted to Goethe, Kant, Nietzsche, Kant and Goethe, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Rodin, the landscape. The reflection on culture also coincides with what he calls a philosophical culture, it is not a professional philosophy as a history and presentation of philosophical doctrines, or as a

presentation and propagation of metaphysical systems, which has of course its place and all its place, but "a particular attitude of mind towards the phenomena of the world and life" (Simmel, 2002: 139). He presented this attitude in "Philosophische Kultur", partially translated as "Mélanges de Philosophie relativiste", and the subtitle "Contribution to Philosophical Culture". This attitude is intended to 'penetrate through the surface' of things 'to a depth' layer where they present themselves to the consciousness with a new meaning and under a new set. It is also necessary to make room for the text "Feminine Culture", which closes the book "Philosophische Kultur" and succeeds the one on "The Tragedy of Culture". The question is then the following one: what meanings the women's movement will have in the future - and Simmel is taken in flagrant offence of prophetism when he declares that this question will undoubtedly be more important for the future of the species than the labour movement. Let's say soberly that among the founders he alone understood the importance of the women's movement, the role of money in male/female relationships, from the marriage of money to prostitution, and that "the culture of humanity is not in fact asexual" but that it reveals itself "with the exception of rare provinces, entirely masculine" (Simmel, 1996c: 419).

Apart from the role of money, the respective place of means and ends, the fragmented nature of culture and its tragedy, Simmel underlines a division that has arisen between object and subject: on the one hand, the natural mechanism, an interpretation of the world due to the natural sciences, which regards it as a mechanism governed by a strict causality of which mathematics is the language; on the other hand, a world of goals.

The crisis of science that Husserl will speak of is already present in this conception, where we also recognize a Hegelian theme in the relations between objective culture and subjective culture.

Objective culture and subjective culture

Let's start with a definition of culture, some of which can be seen to be related with the objective spirit of Hegel.

> What we call culture contains a series of formations obeying their own law, which have placed themselves, by their pure sufficiency, beyond this daily life mixed with so many hanks, involved in practice and subjective: I have named science, religion and art. These trainings, undoubtedly, may require to be maintained and understood according to their intrinsic norms and ideas far from all the opacities of contingent life. Nevertheless, there is yet another way that leads to their intelligence, or more precisely it is a way that leads to yet another intelligence of what they are. Indeed, empirical life, in a sense without principle, contains permanently the beginnings and elements of these formations which, from there, will rise to a level of autonomous development, crystallized around its own idea alone (Simmel, 2001c: 474-475).

In my opinion, we must be attentive to everything that has not yet been institutionalized and where these new training courses are being read. But these ideals, which are part of the energies that determine life, can follow their own course.

> Science becomes an autonomous form of everyday knowledge as soon as it takes knowledge and its demands for truth as its sole goal. Religion as well brings love and pure immanent devotion to a degree where they become religion. The same goes for art that seizes «formative energies» which, in the end, take hold of it (Simmel, 2001c: 476).

Here Simmel gives us his general model: life is made up of many contents, aspirations, tendencies, desires and needs; these can only be satisfied in forms. Sexuality will be satisfied in the various forms of union; hunger in organizations more or less frozen in the meal; piety, this aspiration that is difficult to dissociate from the need to believe, will find a form in religious, but also patriotic, associations.

The contents Simmel talks about when he wants to establish a sociological viewpoint will be understood, in his latest philosophy, on the model of creative energies of life. In this sense, all these institutions, organizations, dependent on the plasticity of life, only take on meaning when they are the result of these needs/contents, but it is also necessary that the existing shaping be invigorated by the individuals who take it over again to transform them or at least to inhabit them. Simmel shows how, on all sides of existence, a division has arisen between the established forms and the aspirations of individuals. If the forms often turn against life, the axial turning point, I am willing to stress the reverse possibility, which has been less emphasized, i.e., the fact that life is also ahead of the fixed forms.

"By cultivating things, by increasing their value beyond what their nature being allocates to them, we in turn cultivate ourselves" (Simmel, 1989: 618). This is a general process which, according to Simmel, has taken a particular turn in the culture of his time, since tools, means of circulation, products of science, technology and art have developed culturally, whereas the culture of individuals has not followed this exponential development. The machine, for example, has become much more intellectualized than the workers, as the spirit invested in it escapes its users. The same applies, all other things being equal, for the scientist, who now has to rely on a whole set of instruments or tools of which he is not the manufacturer. The division of labour has created a distance between the producer and the product, which leads to the point where the producer "no longer sees himself in his action" (Simmel, 1989: 630). In fact there is a dissociation between the creative personality and the created work, where everything happens as if the work were acquiring an autonomous existence in relation to the producers. The specialization linked to the division of labour leads to the "vast process of objectification of the most modern culture" (Simmel, 1989: 643). This schema of the means-to-purpose ratio has already been used in the more sociological work and in particular in the article "How social forms are maintained". Institutions,

organizations are described as being able to follow their own purposes and no longer those for which they were conceived as mere means; but also, they subdue existence to their own norms (a caricatural example of which being for him the economy), and derive from the service of life to its cutting. If the relationship between work and strictly commercial production is to notice, Simmel's position differs from that one of Marx in the sense that Simmel is precisely broadening the question of culture as a whole. Thus he will say that

> "Marx's fetish value attributed to economic objects in the era of commercial production is only a special case, somewhat different, in the destiny of our cultural contents. These contents fall under the following paradox - and increasingly so, with the growth of culture, they are indeed created by subjects and destined for subjects, but in the intermediate stage of the objective form that they take beyond and beyond these bodies, they evolve according to an immanent logic, and thus become alien to their origin as well as to their end" (Simmel, 2001a: 217).

There is undoubtedly an increase in the "intellectual capital" to which our spirit is watering itself, but taking only a very small part.

We must understand that if man is an heir and not only a descendant, it is because he can formally appropriate traditions, organizations, works, which correspond to an objectification of the spirit, and this objectivation opens up a world(s) to him. The question for Simmel is then: to what extent do these objective elements make it possible to become "evolutionary factors for individuals themselves?" (1989: 627). The question is not about how culture without its knowledge directs the creator, but much more about how culture elements are appropriate. If Newton's discovery lies in a book, it remains of the objective mind, it is a "potential property of society" (Simmel, 1989: 626) but if no one appropriates it, it is not cultural value. The relations between science and society or science and culture today are undoubtedly such a fact, a great part of science remaining outside the culture of individuals.

In "The Tragedy of Culture" Simmel describes the situation of modern man who experiences

> this feeling of being surrounded by a multitude of cultural elements, which without being devoid of significance for him, are not at the bottom of the matter because it cannot assimilate all of them internally in particular, nor can it reject them purely and simply, because they potentially enter the sphere of its cultural evolution (Simmel, 2001a: 220).

The accumulation of the reserve of objective knowledge becomes incommensurable with what the individual personality can absorb itself. Yet the individual personality is embedded in these networks, but without the capacity for appropriation.

Do all these objective productions that are part of the concept of culture still find a place in the accomplishment of the subject? This is doubtful, but nonetheless, taking advantage of the Marxian diagram of the productive forces and relations of production, Simmel argues that the productive forces, here the individuals, can be ahead of the contents of the objective mind. If cultural institutions are deserted, it can simply mean that they are no longer in line with the demands of the formative vital forces – *mehr Leben* - , whose destiny is to create forms can become 'more-than-life': *mehr als Leben*, to the point of turning against it.

A double observation: objective knowledge has moved away from subjective culture, on the one hand, but the energies of life can also be found beyond the established forms, on the other. It is perhaps not easy to argue that forms turn against life and at the same time that life can be beyond fixed forms. Indeed, think in terms of '*and*' rather that in terms of '*either*' this or that does not predict an outcome, and as a result it is difficult to be heard. There are contradictory processes at work, as in the conflict that breaks and unites.

It would be possible to read Simmel's entire work as an analysis of the journeys that the Self carries out between itself and religious,

cultural, social forms - journeys that each time express a conflict between the individuality turned towards itself and the social mechanism, or between individuality for itself and individuality as an element socializing in a form. The tragedy of the situation lies in the fact that individuality is defined by these two opposite movements:

> The individual has the desire to be a harmonious whole, a whole with its own centre, from which all the elements of his being and acting take on a unified meaning, in reciprocal relations. But if, on the other hand, it is the supra-individual whole that must be perfect in itself, if it must with a meaning that finds satisfaction in itself to realize its own objective idea, then it cannot admit this perfection for its members (...). The totality of the whole set (even if it takes practical reality only in certain actions of individuals, or even within each individual) is eternally in the struggle with the totality of the individual (Simmel, 1989: 690).

This representation of individuality will be emphasized in the texts on Goethe and George, but also in all those where quantitative individualism and qualitative individualism are opposed, or Latin individualism and Germanic individualism. The analysis is based on representations and ideal figures typical of individuality, which would be exemplary for periods or socio-cultural areas. Thus, the cosmopolitan imagination of the individual and the Kantian conception are opposed to the romantic imagination of uniqueness and originality, and moreover the Latin individuality can be opposed to the Germanic individuality.

Bildung

The next step is to grasp the role played by the idea of the '*Bildung*', seen as the backdrop against which Simmel's opposition between the individual and society, between subjective culture and objective culture is understood, and which makes it possible to understand the hierarchy he establishes between the individual,

society and humanity. The *Bildung* is a common representation, an ideal representation, that literature has been able to invent and through which a norm of behaviour and orientation towards oneself is diffused. It concerns the relationship between man and culture and presupposes an educational ideal. It is thus possible to distinguish between the educational ideal of the eighteenth century and that one of the nineteenth century: the first "aimed at the formation of man himself, and thus the personal and interior value, but it was ousted in the nineteenth century by a formation as a sum of objective knowledge and behaviour" (Simmel, 1989: 621). It is this imaginary scheme of self-relationship that will be confronted with socio-cultural transformations and will serve to judge them. In this regard, regretting the absence of a common idea in "The Conflict of Modern Culture", Simmel noted that the profession would seem to be the most common answer if people were asked what idea guides their existence (Simmel, 1999b: 190). Such an answer does not correspond to the conception of a culture that would overlook individuals in their entirety and in their particular activities, as Christianity, the Renaissance or the Enlightenment would have done. Maybe so, but it seems to me that at that moment an idea such as socialism could have been evoked. One can characterize this representation by the relationship between individual self-training and appropriation of cultural goods, and it is the difficulties of realizing this process in modern living conditions that will be emphasized in his philosophy of culture and his critique of modern culture, and it is the relations that these terms maintain that express the unity of this imaginary representation of human achievements. Simmel's reader is accustomed to crossing these terms, and affinity relationships between history and artistic activity are frequent, as well as the fundamental reciprocal relationship between lived experience and form, or between understanding and world view. Culture is the obligatory point of passage from self to self. Wilhelm Meister learns only one thing, namely to train himself (*sich bilden*). It is this reference that leads Simmel to criticize the pure search for originality, as if it were possible to establish individuality only on itself and to make an economy of the journey through the

objectivity of established cultural forms. One could suggest here the existence of a homology between socialization and cultivation: in forms of socialization the individual constitutes himself, subject to certain a-priori, as a socialized individual and in the cultural process "the subject is objective and the objective is subjective and this constitutes the specificity of the cultural process" (Simmel, 2001a: 198-199). *Bildung* presupposes that the interior confronts itself with the exterior, that the interaction with the works, with the foreigner (hence the importance of translation), with the products of culture, is strong. It is in connection to these relations that the question of individual freedom - and Simmel frequently repeats the distinctions between qualitative and quantitative individualism - arises at the same time as that of relations between subjective culture and objective culture, i. e. the production of spiritual differentiation that emerges from the encounter of latent mental dispositions with pre-existing objective spiritual productions.

> It is the characteristic of this objective spirit of presenting oneself in crystallized objective figures, of giving material and stimulation, to develop the nature of the individual and personal mind: it is the essence of the 'Bildung' that our purely personal dispositions are realized sometimes as the form of any given objective spiritual content, sometimes as the content of a given spiritual-objective form; and it is only in this synthesis that our spiritual life gains its full potential. (Simmel, 1992: 813).

In "Social Differentiation" or "Soziologie", Simmel strongly emphasizes that increasing the size of the group puts us in touch with the objective spirit, whether this group is real or more abstract, as are literary groups that may not rely on contact between their members, for example. Objective culture can be understood as the accumulation of the work of generations formally open to all, and this process is conditioned by a distance from the restricted group, which is a corollary of an openness to the larger group or groups:

> As soon as the work of the species has produced fruits that it has capitalized on in the form of writing, in visible works and

> constant models, this flow of organic sap that directly connects the real group and each of its members is interrupted (…), he can now feed on objective sources, which do not need the presence of a person, it is above all his formal objectivity, his absence of links with the subject that open to the individual a supra-social food; and its intellectual content, both quantitatively and qualitatively, depends much more on his ability to appropriate things than on what is offered to him (Simmel, 1992: 428-429).

It should also be added that this cultural world, unlike the one corresponding to the competition, because of its universal accessibility in principle, allows everyone to taste the products of the mind without this achievement being taken from another: the objective world Simmel speaks of is the result of an objectification of life currents which in turn become transindividual and available. While indicating this formal availability, Simmel does not forget to point out, and this is a consequent relativism, that

> the apparent equality with which the cultural material offers itself to all those who want to grasp it is in reality a bloody farce: just like those other freedoms of liberal doctrines which, admittedly, do not prohibit the private individual from accessing goods of all kinds, but pass under silence that only those who are already (Simmel, 1989: 606).

Individual and culture

When we relate this representation of the individual, whose formation necessarily involves cultural goods, to changes in social organization, we are led to ask questions pertaining to what Simmel calls philosophical sociology. If the dissolution of traditional social ties is likely to bring about an increase in individual freedom, or at least a change in the type of obligations that tend to become impersonal, and if objective culture is formally a source from which everyone can draw, what will be the meaning of the situation process?

Given Simmel's starting point, it is expected that this will be an assessment in terms of the relationship between objective and subjective culture. In other words, what is the value of this freedom from a cultural point of view if it leads to cynicism and blasphemy, and not to a culture of oneself through appropriation of cultural works? Such an evaluation is obviously not a pure sociology, which has stricter rules of objectivity, but these questions answer a need for clarification, where science is silent because it has not yet studied these questions or because they fall outside its legitimate field of intervention.

When Simmel deals with the individual and individuality, he seems to call upon several registers which are as follows: the sociological individual (the empirical structure of the individual insofar as he is a social being, the internal conditions and principles which make society possible as an objective form of subjective souls, to take up the questions of the excursus), the historical individual and the conceptions which are attached to it. In his work on the foundation of sociological discipline and particularly in his digression on the problem "How is society possible?" Simmel sets the boundaries of social influence, at the same time as he describes the individual situated between two contradictory determinations:

> Thus, the fact of socialization brings the individual back into the double position from which I started: that he is contained in it and that he is at the same time outside it, that he is a member of his organism and that he is a closed whole. The existence of man is not only partly social and partially individual, but it is placed under the fundamental, determining and irreducible category of a unit, which can only be expressed by the synthesis or the simultaneity of the two determinations of man who logically oppose each other: the one who places him in the position of being a member of society and the one who makes him a being for himself, the one who is produced by society and taken by it, and the one who has his own centre and lives for the own centre (Simmel, 1992: 56).

A double determination that causes the individual to oppose social forms, whereas he can only develop his individuality through and in contact with these forms. In this sense, the relationship between form and life emerges, as if the moving person were destined to crystallize in the fixed one.

All sociological studies take into account this double determination by showing how individualisation and empowerment of participants from any social group can be achieved. "Indeed, one of the few general rules that can be expected to be general about the form of social evolution is that the enlargement of a group goes hand in hand with the individualisation and empowerment of its particular members" (Simmel, 1989: 469).

The individual is never totally included within these circles, a part of reserve is allocated to him. Continuing, one can draw the conclusion that the individual is not assignable to a fixed place, that multi-appointments are becoming increasingly possible, and that they will have the effect of further strengthening individualization. The multiplication of possible contacts produces a detached attitude, which aims to preserve the individual from all the demands of urban life, hence the importance of tact and discretion, amply emphasized in Simmel's work on the big city, sociability, secrecy and secret society. For him, there would be a dual orientation of the individual towards society: a tendency to collective life and the loss of self in a group, counterbalanced by the opposite tendency towards the individual. Simmel therefore studies the effects of modernity on individual experiences more broadly than by rationalisation alone. Using a cautious wording he argues:

> There seems to be a certain quantitative dosage between the instinct that pushes for individualization and the instinct to dissolve in the community, so that if one cannot devote himself fully to one area of life, he is looking for another area in which to give his measure as he feels it is necessary (Simmel, 1996a: 203).

It is by relying on such an idea that he will show that forms of socialization such as fashion achieve this unity of opposites, manage to reconcile individualization and belonging to a group. While the increasing individualisation of individuals is noticeable, it does not mean that they will close themselves up, but that the socialisations chosen will grow at the expense of traditional affiliations, as modern man tends

> to individualise the more personal and freer character of his commitments. Because of the way he reacts, mixed with immediate sensitivity and aesthetics, he can no longer be part of traditional unions or engage in close ties that do not respect his personal tastes and sensibilities (Simmel, 2002: 172).

The sociological individual of modernity can be conceived as the place where a whole series of environmental determinations meet, but also as a person decomposable into as many facets as belonging to different social circles. The interplay between the different identifications of the individual presents a complex image of the individual. As a model, shaping reality, this viewpoint is still relevant today: it is based on the idea that individualisation and individual freedom are linked to the monetary economy, on the fact that groups are developing in a crossover way, and on the fact that they are becoming more and more dependent on the monetary economy.

The relationships between personal experiences and modernity and the analysis of modernity, beyond the mere analysis of rationalization, imply the description of forms of socialization that ensure, for example, new relations between men and women. Studies on gender relations and their changes illustrate this theme about marriage, which has become a prison for women.

> The forms and habits of conjugal life, solidified, binding for individuals, would tend to oppose the personal evolution of the contracting parties, especially that of women, which is far beyond. Individuals would now seek freedom, understanding,

> equality of rights and formation in which conjugal life, as it has traditionally and objectively established itself, would leave no real space. The objective spirit of marriage, so to speak, has fallen behind subjective minds in its evolution (Simmel, 1989: 644).

However, this evolution is only possible if the relationship between individuals and social forms is not understood in terms of a total determination of individuals by social forms, but as a reciprocal action, where what characterizes modernity corresponds to an increase in individual freedom due to the multiplication of affiliations. Simmel thus avoids what he calls "extreme Soziologismus", which makes the individual "a simple point of intersection of threads that society has spun before him and beside him, the result of social influences from which derive, because of their changing mixes, and entirely, the contents and colouring of his existence" (Simmel, 2001b: 391).

For, as we have shown by relying on the digression "Wie ist Gesellschaft möglich", the individual is also a centre for himself, and this image of the individual as a self-centered whole raises a barrier to extreme sociologism from the beginning. It could be argued that Simmel's thinking is based on a semantics, a strong imaginary representation in the Germanic area, that has strongly differentiated the inner man from the social man. If his sociological work insists on the partly a-social and non-social character of the individual, that is to say on the fact that the self is never totally social, it is in reference to a tradition that has built up an imaginary ideal relationship between the individual and society, between the individual and culture, between the individual and the law.

When he reflects on the art of acting, Simmel differentiates between role and individuality.

> At all levels, we find ideal forms that our existence must take. It is very rare that man determines his behaviour solely on the basis of his own existence. Most of the time we see before us a pre-existing form in which we have poured our individual conduct.

> Here is the preliminary form of the comedian's art: man lives or plays a role traced in advance, which is not his absolutely personal evolution depending only on himself, but he does not abandon his own being, which he instead pours into the other, and directs the flow of this other role towards these channels with multiple ramifications, each of which, though flowing in an already existing bed, collected the inner being to give it a particular form (Simmel, 2004a: 203-204).

In ordinary life, a tension resides in this fact: we are always immersed in the preliminary form of our life, so that, according to what we are told by a role played for social or religious reasons, we take a form that is partly foreign to us, but personal existence takes a pre-existing form that feeds on the individual's own life.

It is by relying on a literary and philosophical tradition that Simmel can reject sociologism and it is also this starting point that allows us to judge modernity. Simmel refers to what he calls a reflection on the values of life which Goethe and Nietzsche are eminent representatives of: the idea of an individual's perfection without taking into account the altruistic relation to society or selfishness with regard to oneself, a perfection that "constitutes an objective value, which can assert itself outside the personal state of happiness or misfortune of that individual" (Simmel, 1999b: 124).

However, the meaning of this liberation is not necessarily positive when self-improvement is forgotten, which is precisely pointed out in the literature on the crisis of culture. "The Philosophy of Money" could be seen as a time when Simmel's thinking oscillates between the elements of liberation brought about by the monetary economy and the tendencies to objectify the cultural process in relation to individuals. Indeed, the general conditions linked to the monetary economy create a completely new relationship between men, a mixture of objective interdependence and subjective liberation. The paradoxical nature of such a formulation is that it is because the most personal elements are erased in the interdependent relations between men that a space for the individual and his or her freedom can exist. Anticipating some

of the findings of systems analysis by considering money as a generalized code or medium of communication, Simmel points out that

> money is the absolutely appropriate medium for such a relationship, for it creates relationships between humans, but leaves humans out of them; it is the exact equivalent of concrete benefits, but a very inadequate equivalent of their individual and personal component: the narrowness of the impersonal relationships that a monetary economy implies makes it possible to mobilize only a part of the personality, and everything happens as if the other parts could concentrate on the personality itself (Simmel, 1989: 404).

With these remarks, Simmel anticipated the subsequent observations that will see the simultaneous increase in personal and impersonal relationships in the modern world.

An ideal of culture serves to put social reality into perspective and to point out that the process by which "objective figures in which a creative life has been incarnated and who are then taken up by souls to make them cultivated" tends to become increasingly empowered and that "subjects are drawn into the content and speed of evolution of industries and sciences, arts and organizations, indifference or contradiction to the demands that these subjects should put forward for their own development; i. e., their culture" (Simmel, 2000: 191). The critique of specialization and its narrowness, the negative relationship between individual capacities for appropriation of cultural goods and the multiplicity of these goods, all these themes form the framework of a critique of modernity and modern culture. The appropriation or integration of the various productions of the mind into an existence that takes on meaning through this work no longer appears to be a sensible end, and man is described as being trapped or rejected on the shores of a process that he no longer controls and which, as a packed mechanism, pushes ever further the limits and makes of existence

only a succession of means with a view to changing and never reached ends.

Individuals, culture, society, humanity

We know that for Simmel there are several possible points of view on social reality. In this sense, the individualism that develops in social forms and in relation to social formations concerns the sociological point of view. Now, to question 'individualism' it is also entirely legitimate to involve the categories of the 'individual' or 'humanity'. Here Simmel explicitly relies on Nietzsche, to whom he attributes the merit of having "clearly felt the difference between humanity's interest and the social interest. Society is one of the formations in which humanity deposits the contents of life, but it is neither essential for everyone, nor the only formation in which human development is accomplished" (Simmel, 1999a: 125-126).

The individual and his or her achievements can be assessed in two ways, humanity and society, which do not maintain pre-established harmony or even conflict, the demands of society not being confused with those of a higher culture for which "practical enrichment of the 'man type' is central, independently of any immediate social utility (Simmel, 1999a: 127).

If by studying the forms of socialization and the changes that affect them we can show how a phenomenon of individualization is developing, this phenomenon, from the point of view of the category of culture and humanity, is also likely to yield us other information, or to allow us and lead us to judgments different from those of history or sociology. Simmel draws a distinction between culture, personality and society, which are all points from which a relationship to the surrounding world is established.

But this question is relevant because we are also led to provide meaningful interpretations where our knowledge is not the most certain and where the characteristics of maximum rigour, which is difficult to reach, are also often the most interesting in relation to the meaning of existence. The question is, for example, of a cultural

nature concerning the women's movement: What are "its energies, which are specifically creative, capable of increasing the fund of spiritual values?" (Simmel, 2001d: 252). We can also question the meaning of liberation in relation to more rigid and firm social ties. Indeed, the slightest pressure of social constraints does not necessarily and as a corollary, give rise to a type of relationship with oneself aimed at the formation of that self. Freedom from social ties does not imply the development of self-directed practices on the part of the individual, let alone that particular type of relationship to oneself implied by the *Bildung*, of which Simmel gave, in his text on Goethe, the following definition: "just as the human being must live outside his interiority, the artist must produce outside his interiority, constantly advancing his individual day after day" (Simmel, 2001b: 391). It is an illustration of what he will call "individual law". *Bildung* presupposes a relationship with the outside world, with others. Personality only develops through an incessant process of metabolism and it is this relationship that allows the personality to prove the value of its existence. The cultural crisis is a symptom of the disconnect between objective culture and subjective culture, and it is only to be hoped that "the immense work of humanity will create ever more numerous and diverse forms through which the personality will assert itself and show the value of its existence" (Simmel, 2004b: 258.)

If one is attentive to words, one realizes that Simmel speaks of humanity and not of society. "Soziologie" closes with an analysis of the respective place of the categories of the individual, of society and humanity: Simmel subordinates society to the categories of the individual and humanity, i. e. to categories that involve a representation of individual achievements. Human values that are measured in their more or less important place in these ideal worlds are often only accidentally related to social values, although they quite often cross them. On the other hand, purely personal qualities have an autonomous meaning, totally independent of social entanglement. The conclusion of "Soziologie", as well as the preceding text, illustrates the role that the imagination of the *Bildung*

– of 'culture' – plays in the conception of relations between individuals and society and *a fortiori* in the sociological construction of Simmel.

Of course, such a conception presupposes an ideal of culture in relation to which the specialized man distant from the objective culture appears to be a mere cog in an ensemble that surpasses it. Such an ideal, if it makes room for individual uniqueness, if it thinks of human fulfilment, does not reduce it to forms of authenticity based on a specific good that can be developed, because the educational ideal of reference involves much more conflictual appropriation/transformation.

The turning point in the conception of culture allows us to understand how, in his sociological work, Simmel relies on an 'ethical personalism' which corresponds to the way in which he conceives Nietzsche's moral philosophy and which in turn provides him with elements of reflection to think about the relations between individual, society and humanity. The importance of Goethe's figure and the work he has devoted to it is also crucial.

When he tries to give a collected and condensed picture of our situation and our life, for example in Michel Ange, he describes how we resist, avoid, deal with the constraints, demands, tyrannies that nature and society exert on us, but without which we would not be led to the creative activity of forms. In this sense, self-ownership is a struggle and a fight and not a mere inculcation; it is a permanent conflict between the individual and the traditions bequeathed by society. Let us say it, also in this way, if texts let a pessimistic tone shine through, the hope of this 'third party' that he occasionally invokes is also a call to transformation and creation, which concern the possibilities of the individual, and therefore of humanity. The earthly kingdom, the divine kingdom and a third kingdom, where humanity would finally find itself free from its finitude and misery, to attain perfection and the absolute, without having to project itself into the kingdom of the hereafter which always rhymes with powers that are too dogmatic, these three kingdoms inspire this Simmelian

utopia: "To give to the absolute the form of the finite" (Simmel, 1996b: 328-329.

There is no doubt that we can find here again a trace of the *Bildung* as Hegel understood it: such a process is not a transmission of information by an educator, but an experience that is a conflictual process by which a spiritual being discovers his own identity, seeks to actualize his identity through the way he travels. Is this not what Simmel speaks of when he tells us not to reconcile the conceptual oppositions between Kant and Goethe, but to deny them in a common experience (Simmel, 1995: 166) or to confront Kant and Nietzsche in order to inspire us with their respective morals by conceiving that they aim at different dimensions, but that they share the idea that the value of man lies "in a being and deed determined by will" (Simmel, 1993: 21)? If he borrows this representation of action, it is also to be linked to the idea of presence at the very bottom of ourselves of this creative force which enables us to realize what ought to be.

Every sociology is based on a background that includes a representation of the relations between individuals and society and to contrast at most two positions, I would also say that one is based on the valorisation of the social. So it insists on the assets society has at its disposal to gain respect: "In general, there is no doubt that a society has everything to awaken in the minds, by the only action it exerts on them, the sensation of the divine: for it is to its members what a god is to its believers" (Durkheim, 1979: 295). The other position presents an interactionist model: a first movement from the outside towards the inside, an elaboration by the inside of this outside, an enrichment, a culture of the self that externalizes this acquis. This tripartition being "the basic form of all life" (Simmel, 1995: 149-150).

This belonging to a cultural tradition is in this sense the background, a 'mental habit' to use a term of Panofsky (1951), which makes it possible to avoid a sociologism to which other foundations of sociology may have succumbed.

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COMMENTARIES TO WATIER

MATTHIEU AMAT

Metaphysics as Life: The Practical Dimension of Simmel's Relationist Program

"Philosophical Culture". An equivocal expression

Among the various themes and issues that have been raised by Patrick Watier, I would like to focus on "philosophical culture", which often seems to me to be particularly undervalued, even though I believe that it is at the very centre of Simmel's concern. It is true that the expression sounds a bit flat and deceptive: "philosophical culture" does not seem to designate an authentic culture, but rather an erudition in the field of philosophy; neither does it sound like a true philosophical point of view, but rather a specific use for the transmitted contents of philosophical doctrines. According to the introduction of the eponymous volume, however, philosophical culture is at the same time a "concept of philosophy" and a "form of culture" (Simmel, 1996: 165-166). The expression is rarely used by Simmel; but when he does it plays a strategic role.

The term "*philosophische Kultur*" is first introduced as the title of a collection of essays that were published between 1905 and 1911, which Simmel reworked and prefaced with an introduction in order to demonstrate a "unity of purpose" of the diverse texts, as he wrote to Husserl when he sent him the compilation (Simmel, 2012: 941). Another editorial decision indicates the high significance that Simmel attached to the expression "philosophical culture": needing a title for a collection of essays that presented his work to the French

public in 1911, Simmel chose "Mélanges de philosophie relativiste. Contributions à la culture philosophique". This compilation gathers texts which were written over a period of twenty years and whose objects are even more various than those in the German collection: ranging from an excerpt from the "Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft" (1893) devoted to the problem of liberty, to the first chapter of the "Hauptprobleme der Philosophie" (1910) dedicated to the nature of philosophy, through excerpts from the first chapter of the "Philosophie des Geldes" (1900) and "Schopenhauer und Nietzsche" (1907).

Simmel's choice indicates that "relativist philosophy" and "philosophical culture" are keywords that are supposed to be able to identify the spirit of his entire enterprise. This title also suggests that there is an internal link between "philosophical culture" and the "relativist worldview", which was theorized, in the first chapter of the "Philosophy of Money" and in the "Selbstdarstellung", to be a principle that is at the same time epistemological and cosmological (Simmel, 1989: 93; Simmel, 1958: 10). My claim is that philosophical culture constitutes the practical aspect of Simmel's philosophical relativism, that is, relativism seen as a way of culture, in the sense of *Bildung* or cultivation.

The expression appeared at a time when Simmel, as one of the founders of and a main contributor to the journal "Logos: Internationale Zeitschrift für Kulturphilosophie", was participating intensely in the constitution of a Neo-Kantian-style philosophical project he called the 'philosophy of culture' (Homman, 1994; Kramme, 1995). It is in a section called "Zur Philosophie der Kultur" that the famous essay "The Concept and Tragedy of Culture" (first published in *Logos*) found its place in "Philosophische Kultur". But this fact also suggests that, for Simmel, the project of the philosophy of culture is subordinate to that of philosophical culture. The description of the structure and process of objective culture calls for a cultural response: "philosophical culture". The emphasis shifts from the theoretical to the practical dimension, in

such a way that Simmel believed it original enough to coin a new expression.

Two ways of practicing philosophy

In the modest dimensions of this presentation, I'd like to draw particular attention to one of the determinations of philosophical culture: a "turning point from metaphysics as dogma to metaphysics as life or function" (Simmel, 1996: 165). As "metaphysics as life",

> [Philosophical culture] does not in fact consist in the knowledge of metaphysical systems or the confession of faith in individual theories, but rather in a consistent attitude of mind toward all that exists, in an intellectual mobility towards the stratum in which, in the broadest variety of profundities and connected to the broadest variety of actualities, all possible currents of philosophy run[1] (Simmel, 1996: 165).

The very first chapter of the "Hauptprobleme der Philosophie" already defined philosophy from the "philosopher's attitude" rather than from its "goals and content", describing the philosopher as "having an organ capable of welcoming the totality of being and reacting to it" (Simmel, 1996: 16). This applies to all sorts of philosophising, however, and is not yet a definition of "metaphysics as life". In speaking of metaphysics as life, the introduction of "Philosophical Culture" adds two other criteria.

First, the totalising horizon that philosophy always presupposes is mediated here by the "broadest variety of actualities", that is, by the multiplicity of concrete objects. The Simmel reader will recall the *Philosophy of Money*'s program – "finding in each of life's details the totality of its meaning" (Simmel, 1989: 12) – and will reflect upon, for example, money, jewellery, garments, and teapots.

But the difference concerns not only the objects of philosophising, but its very goal. In metaphysics as dogma, the

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[1] Simmel, 1997: 35; translation slightly amended.

attitude towards all that exists leads to the production of objective contents (theories and systems) and finally to a "conception of the world". Metaphysics as a dogma is not all sterile: it is the attitude of the "brilliant creators within the history of philosophy": "the spiritual individuality is so strong among them that it can only be projected into a worldview that is completely and unilaterally determined according to its content". That makes this way of philosophising intellectually "intolerant", but profoundly creative (Simmel 1996: 165).[2] On the contrary, metaphysics as life is anything but unilateral or intolerant. It not only has an inexhaustible pool of objects, but is characterised by a continual variation of standpoints, following virtually "all currents of philosophy". Yet, for this reason, metaphysics as life neither professes nor produces metaphysical systems or even objectively consistent theories. Its fecundity stands at another level.

Metaphysics as life and relativism

Considering "all possible currents of philosophy", metaphysics as life seems very similar to relativism as a principle of knowledge, as it was presented in the third section of chapter 1 of the "Philosophy of Money". I recall its main principles: 1. "The constitutive principles that claim to express, once and for all, the essence of objects, are transposed into regulative principles which are only points of view in the progress of knowledge" (Simmel, 1989: 106)[3]; 2. such principles can then possess a "simultaneous validity" (Simmel, 1989: 107). For example: There is nothing wrong with sometimes considering an historical fact from the perspective of historical materialism, and at other times from an idealistic perspective; there is nothing wrong if we alternately consider the soul as a principle of the world (idealism) and as part of the world (realism); on the contrary, this is how the true process of knowledge works.

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[2] Simmel, 1997: 35; translation slightly amended.

[3] Simmel, 2004: 108.

The true unity of knowledge is secured only by such a dissolution of dogmatic rigidity into the living and fluent process of knowledge. Its ultimate principles become realized not in the form of mutual exclusion, but in the form of mutual dependence, mutual evocation and mutual complementation[4] (Simmel, 1989: 107).

This relativist or rather 'relationist' attitude, this "dialectic without synthesis", in the words of Landmann, is defended in epistemological terms (Landmann, 1968: 16). The truth, explains Simmel, is a "relational concept" and is built circularly (Simmel, 1989: 100).

In passages added in the second edition (1907), the "Philosophy of Money" suggests moving the focus from the process of knowledge to the "life" or "spiritual existence" behind it. This existence, as conscious life, must be considered under "two categories that complement each other":

> We must conceive the spiritual process as a continuous flux, in which there are no distinct breaks, so that one state of the soul passes into the next uninterruptedly, in the manner of organic growth. The contents, abstracted from this process and existing in an ideal independence, appear under a totally different aspect: as an aggregate, a graduated scheme, a system of single concepts or propositions clearly distinguished from one another[5] (Simmel, 1989: 114).

There is a clear analogy between regulative principles and objective contents of knowledge on the one hand, and flux and contents of life on the other. The process of knowledge is also a shaping of the soul, and the relativist process of knowledge is the one that best expresses the structure of the soul, the straight-line scheme of its continuous process and the circular scheme of its content's relations (Simmel, 1989: 114) – so that relativism is

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[4] Simmel, 2004: 108; translation slightly amended.

[5] Simmel, 2004: 113; translation slightly amended.

defended not only for science but for life, not only epistemologically but because of its cultural fecundity.

Relativism as culture

This is what the introduction of the "Philosophical Culture" harks back to and deepens. This time the relational process is defended directly in terms of life and culture:

> There is a contradiction [between the principles] only in their dogmatic crystallisation and not in the mobility of philosophical life itself, the individual path of which can be characterised as personal and unified, no matter what its turns and bends[6] (Simmel, 1996: 164).

In "metaphysics as life", life finds two places: it underlies the process of philosophising but is also its result: not an objective and theoretical result, but a living and practical one, that of a "philosophical life".

> [I]f philosophy (…) remains in its inner orientation in the discontinuity of dogmatic partisanship, then there are still two uniformities on either side of the latter; the functional one, of which I first spoke, and this teleological one, for which philosophy is an exponent, an element or a form of culture in general[7] (Simmel, 1996: 165-166).

At this juncture, let us recall a famous definition of culture found in the "Concept and Tragedy of Culture": "culture is the path from closed unity through developed diversity to developed unity" (Simmel, 1996: 387). It appears clearly that "metaphysics as life" aims to constitute such a culture. While the "developed unity" refers to the "broadest variety of actualities" that stimulate the process of

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[6] Simmel, 1997: 35; translation amended.

[7] Simmel 1997: 36.

philosophising, the two poles of unity refer to the functional and teleological unity of a life in process.

To underline that this philosophical culture is not purely intellectual, but aims to be an authentic cultivation of the soul, it is worth quoting the last lines of *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche*, which clearly demonstrate the cultivating dimension of relativism, this time on an emotional and ethical level. The challenge is to know whether a synthesis between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche's evaluation of life is possible.

> Their unity is possible only in a dimension that is distinct from the one of their objective content: in the subject who considers them both. Feeling the oscillation of the spiritual existence in the spacing between the terms of the opposition, the soul extends itself – despite or rather thanks to the fact that it does not feel obliged to any of the parties – to the point where it embraces and enjoys the desperation and the jubilation of life as poles that measure its proper extension, its proper force and the fullness of its form (Simmel, 1995: 408).

One may note, by the way, that to describe culture as an inner distance is a genuinely Nietzschean idea. But this is another issue.

In "The Conflict of Modern Culture", published in 1918, Simmel noted that, for the first time in European history, "we lack a global ideal of culture" (Simmel, 1999: 200), that is, a form which could organise the objectified contents of culture in order to form and orient ourselves. As philosophical culture or metaphysics as life, relativism was a philosophical program that attempted to fill this void, yet without proposing a new totalising conception of the world, but instead a way to play with all the possible worldviews and get a sense for their internal relations.

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EMANUELA MORA

Society as the Not Escapable Ground where Human Life Takes Place

In the few pages of this contribution, I would like to address the point that appears to me as the take at the core of Watier's essay, namely that Simmel subordinates the concept of society to the ideal of individual and humanity. According to Watier,

> Soziologie closes with an analysis of the respective place of the categories of the individual, of society and humanity: Simmel subordinates society to the categories of the individual and humanity, i. e. to categories that involve a representation of individual achievements. […]. Purely personal qualities have an autonomous meaning, totally independent from social entanglement.

He stresses the Simmelian distinction between subjective culture and objective culture. According to the German scholar, indeed, the former is the creative force that urges the individual to exit from himself/herself and to objectify himself/herself in forms of knowledge. These eventually become the objective culture: the system of science, art, religion; but also machines, values, artistic representations. With the industrialization and increasing division of labour, the subject is no more the producer of the tools he/she uses in his/her action, and he/she doesn't acknowledge himself/herself in the product of his/her knowledge. The process ended in the same kind of paradox Marx considers like the core of the capitalist economy: the more the culture growths, the more its contents - created by subjects for subjects - become alien to their origin as well as to their ends (Simmel, 2001 [1909-1918]: p. 217). Assuming the tragic Simmelian vision of the contemporary culture, Watier maintains that society is for Simmel as a constraining network of relations where the human being can't adequately express

himself/herself and be acknowledged in his/her integrity, for social forms exert a reductionist power on the humanity of subjects. This is why society would be subordinated to the ideal of individual and humanity.

Though I see to an extent the reliability of this take, I would not uphold the idea of a hierarchy among society, individual and humanity, as I believe that the societal horizon is for Simmel the only and insurmountable empirical ground where individuals play their experiences and try to make sense of themselves.

To clarify my point of view, I briefly recall four aspects of Simmel's thought which, in my opinion, exclude the possibility of a hierarchical vision of reality.

The first point, which has been asserted in all the contributions (at the Conference and) here published, is that Simmel assumes the dual nature of reality: it is only analytically possible to separate individual and society. According to him, society does not exist as a substance, but just as an event where the individuals and other things enter in *Wechselwirkungen*, *id est* effects of reciprocity. The point is - at least this is what it seems to me - that we can't make sense of what happens around us if we consider separated in a substantial way what can be separated just on an analytical level.

While he has often been considered as the master of the fragment, in fact, he has provided, in the culture of the Twentieth Century, a unique research program. He spent his efforts on very few but indeed fundamental questions that deserve interdisciplinary perspectives: how can we make sense of the modern life, which is happening around us, inside us, and ahead of us? If this is the general question, then he has opened the box, making sense of all the elements that are involved in this question: how is society possible? What is the individual? How are individuals connected, through what do they enter in contact? Which are the regimes of the existence of different kinds of entities we use to calling on the scene when we try to make sense of the reality in which we are involved? And what happens, when we make sense of it as

professionals (scientists, artists, lawyers) or as lay actors? To address the wide variety of issues these questions arise, Simmel, in his intellectual life, has worn different disciplinary lenses and avoided to assume unilateral perspectives, aware that life is always something more and beyond the human ability to grasp and crystallize it in any cultural understanding. So he has time to time devoted his efforts to psychology, philosophy, philosophical anthropology, sociology.

The second point on which I'd like to focus works as an excellent example for the inescapability of the societal horizon when we come to consider the human cultural agency in Simmel's thought, namely the technological progress as a case of objective culture. According to him, a specific point of the very tragedy of culture in the modernity is the development of technology, as also Watier points out in the first part of his essay. In the first of the "Four metaphysical chapters", namely that devoted to the "Intuition of life", Simmel refers to the invention of the microscope and telescope as those that have dramatically changed the way human beings have connected with the world they inhabit. He writes:

> Formerly, man had a world defined and limited by the natural use of the senses, a world thus harmonious with his total organization. But since we have built eyes which see at billions of kilometres what we normally observe only at very short distances, and others which disclose the finest structures of objects at an enlargement that would have no place in our natural perception of space, this harmony has been disrupted (Simmel, 2010 [1918]: p. 4).

In a Kantian perspective, he reflects on the practical consequences of this technological advancement, considered as a success of the objective culture: every human being makes sense of the world under the categories, like space and time, that structure the materiality of the world. At the same time, however, the same human being is able to create technologies that change the structure of the world at such an extent that the ordinary categories through

which we understand our world will be in a close future no more suited and adequate.

Technology shows us how the human condition, that always takes place within the limits of social existence, nevertheless still produces the chances of own self-transcendence. In my opinion, this example doesn't mean that society is subordinated to any other dimension of reality although it suggests that the human life is opened continuously toward something that is always still beyond and out of our reach.

The third point I would outline here is the central role that the category of *Wechselwirkung* plays in the sociological work of Simmel. He defines *Wechselwirkungen*, as effects of reciprocity, acts and counter acts that connect individuals each other. Their product is an active/mobile balance among the individuals' pushes to perform and to fulfil individual goals and feelings. Not to be forgotten, moreover, is the resistant presence of nature, artefacts, objects and institutions that are a prominent feature of the interactive situations in which *Wechselwirkungen* occur. I agree with Watier who reminds us that Simmel, in "Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie" (Simmel, 1997 [1907]), associates the latter to a form of violence. Nevertheless, as known, society for Simmel is exactly this, not a substance, just an event that occurs during the *Wechselwirkungen*, as he tells us in the "Grundfragen der Soziologie" (1999 [1917]).

At the same time, however, the German scholar insists that the life of individuals does not end with the *Wechselwirkungen*. As he outlines in "How is the society possibile?"[1], "Each element of a group is not a societally part, but beyond that something else", any individual is just only partially socialized. Moreover, a significant part of the individual's value in the social interactions resides in his/her "extra social imponderability" (1910 [1908]: 381-382).

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[1] How known, this is an excursus ("Wie ist Gesellschaft möglich?") in the first chapter of "Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung", 1908.

Watier is referring to it as the idea of Humanity, which is the way Simmel calls it in the last chapter of "Soziologie". In his last work, the German scholar calls it also "life". In the excursus about "How is society possible", this concept is called as the second a-priori of society. In my opinion, it is associated with the concept of boundary, on which insists Müller in his essay published in this issue of Simmel Studies. The 'extra-social imponderability' of any individual involved in the social situations does not suggest a hierarchical conception of the reality. Instead, it hints at the complex structure of the human being, who does not deploy himself/herself entirely and with full awareness in any of his/her life circumstances.

Finally, my fourth point refers to another category developed by Simmel that has not been addressed in the main articles here gathered. I think of the category of "*Geselligkeit*", namely 'sociability', outlined originally in the opening speech at the first meeting of the German Sociological Society in October 1910 ([1911] 1949) and further elaborated in the "Grundfragen der Soziologie" (1917).

It offers a compelling insight to understand how Simmel avoids any essentialism about society and individuals. It is an excellent case to show that the scholar is a master in staying on the boundary between what is determined by the social constraints and what exceeds any already given entities.

Simmel defines sociability as "A game in which one 'acts' as though all were equal, as though he especially esteemed everyone. This is as far from being a lie as is play or art in all their departures from reality" (Simmel, 1949 [1911]: 257). In his view it is like the process of making up a social situation that promotes at the same time equivalence among people and the specific uniqueness of everybody. By doing that, he maintains that sociability is a form of interaction in which people meet each other and praise their individual features reciprocally, without being driven to compete by their material differences (personal identity's matters, or any return calculation).

Which are the ends of sociability according to Simmel? In it comes to its pure expression the human impulse to associate with others for many different reasons and purposes. Sociability, indeed, is just justified by "a feeling for, by satisfaction in, the very fact that one is associated with others and that the solitariness of the individual is resolved into togetherness, a union with others" (Simmel, 1949: 255).

When he provides examples of sociability, like the feminine coquetry, Simmel suggests that in sociability "the pleasure of the individual is always contingent upon the joy of others; here, by definition, no one can have his satisfaction at the cost of contrary experiences on the part of others" (Ibid., pp. 257).

Simmel is aware that sociability builds up an artificial world, where people stay in the space between two thresholds, an upper and a lower threshold (Ibid., p. 256). The lower threshold deters the individual from the expression of his/her most personal and subjective impulses, that would make challenging the adoption of the "as though" attitude. Similarly, the upper sociability threshold protects people from being overwhelmed by the impersonality of objective social pressures, which impose measurable aims and an abstract efficiency and utility.

As told by Birgitta Nedelmann (1992: 250), the maintenance of such a problematic balance depends on the regulative role of some emotions, like tact, discretion and modesty (Simmel, 1983 [1906]). These emotions at the same time disclose personal traits, protect the boundaries between the intimate spheres of individuals and are the symbolic place where negotiations occur between what people desire to preserve and veil and what they are ready to pool in the social interaction (Cotesta, 1996: 32-38).

Sociability thus tries to realize a tricky balance between an intimate and profound contact among people in their intimacy ("the freedom of bondage", as Simmel calls it; Simmel, 1949: 260) and the realisation of the liveliness, the mutual understanding, the shared consciousness of the group (Ibid., pp. 259-260). In the sociability,

the individual participates in the community: "it is a gift of the individual to the whole, behind which the giver can remain invisible" (Ibid., p. 260), the aim of sociability being the nourishing and maintenance of sociability in itself. The goal is the maintenance of the group.

In my understanding, Simmel considers sociability particularly needed in the modern society since it has produced the "dominance of means over the ends", at such an extent that

> This preponderance of means over ends finds its apotheosis in the fact that the peripheral in life, the things that lie outside its basic essence, have become masters of its centre and even of ourselves. (...) Man has thereby become estranged from himself; an insuperable barrier of media, technical inventions, abilities and enjoyments has been erected between him and his most distinctive and essential being (Simmel, 2005 [1900]: 487-489).

The search for the artificial and constructed condition of sociability thus represents the antidote against a society where objective material content has overcome and obscured the intrinsic value of making society as a boost inspired by humanity (Cotesta, 1996: 32-38). Simmel calls private interests, bureaucracy, consumer goods, etc. as the objective material contents that do alienate the individual from himself/herself, if he/she doesn't protect himself/herself thanks to the wise dispensation of emotions allowing to manage proximity with other people.

In conclusion, I would maintain that society is for Simmel an inescapable ground for the everyday life of any individual. The acknowledgement that the social life rests on a fragile and even precarious balance does not imply a subordination of the society to other elements of reality, like the ideals of culture or humanity. Rather it makes evident how daring and tragic is the human condition and how provisional is any form of understanding that scholars, artists and scientists can produce, to make sense of what happens in the human life.

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