



# Life and Forms. The sociological Meaning of a Metaphor

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Volume 22, Number 1, 2018

Georg Simmel's Living Heritage

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1051009ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1051009ar>

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Publisher(s)

Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN

1616-2552 (print)

2512-1022 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Fitzi, G., Mele, V. & Magatti, M. (2018). Life and Forms. The sociological Meaning of a Metaphor. *Simmel Studies*, 22(1), 135–169. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1051009ar>

## Article abstract

Simmel's work has often been interpreted as a succession of disparate phases of development following contradictory epistemological paradigms and intellectual stances. By analysing the 'money or life metaphor' Hans Blumenberg delivered the paradigmatic assessment for the consistency of Simmel's philosophical work. The present paper critically extends this approach in order to understand the meaning of Simmel's life and forms paradigm and shows that its preeminent theoretical contribution concerns sociological theory. From the analysis emerges that Simmel's delivers a consistent alternative to Parson's conception of functional differentiation in form of a theory of qualitative societal differentiation. In this frame, Simmel's critical adoption and transformation of Marx' theory of societal conflict allows for the foundation of an open-end theory of the development of modernity in the different domains of culture.

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### **Introduction**

Life and forms are the leading concepts of Simmel's late thought. Yet, the question arises whether this is also the case for Simmel's early work. In the history of the critical reception, the idea prevailed that Simmel's oeuvre is divided into three different stages that are grounded on different epistemological paradigms. Accordingly, a positivist, a Neo-Kantian and a life-philosophical turn supposedly characterize his research. In this same vein, a folk psychology approach would be overcome by a Neo-Kantian and then by a Bergsonian way of thinking. Simmel is then regarded as a philosopher who started out with ethnographic interests, turned into a sociologist, rejected sociology later on and became a philosopher of life. It suffices to read a few of Simmel's books to understand that the core of his thought does not fit into these categories. Sociological elements can be found throughout his work

as well as references to the relationship between forms and life. It is interesting to note that Simmel's necrologies, which in most cases were written in the chaotic days of the German and Austrian defeat at the end of World War I, developed a huge influence on his later reception. Lukács's remark about 'Simmel's impressionism' became the basis for a new wave of reception in the 1980s (Lukács, 1918/1991). Likewise, Frischeisen-Köhler attempted to present Simmel's oeuvre in a way that was understandable for a Neo-Kantian audience, so determining the tendency for the secondary literature to adopt the thesis of its straightforward division into different if not incompatible periods (Frischeisen-Köhler, 1919/20).

One of the most authoritative attempts to develop a different approach to Simmel's work and pose the question about his contribution to the history of thought – and this during an age when Simmel was still considered an interesting outsider who deserved to be rediscovered (Gründer, 1976) – was made by Hans Blumenberg (1976).

## Value, Money and Life

In his metaphorological assessment of the 'philosophical consistency' of Simmel's oeuvre, Blumenberg points out the structural conformity of *The Philosophy of Money* of 1900 (GSG 6; Simmel, 2004)<sup>1</sup> with the later philosophy of life, as it is formulated 1918 in *The View of Life* (GSG 16: 209–425; Simmel, 2015). Both money and life are "the characteristics of stages in a process, whose dynamics here as well as there is immanent: solidification and

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<sup>1</sup> Reference is made below to Simmel's original texts, which are now available in the *Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe*, with the acronym GSG being followed by the volume number and the relevant pages. As the English translations of Simmel's works are very fragmented, often incomplete and with few exceptions not consistently aligned with the established text of the GSG edition, alongside the citation of the GSG edition further reference is made only to complete book translations in English or to established single essays editions.

liquidity, shape and dissolution, adherence and disappearance, institution and freedom, levelling and individuality” (Blumenberg, 1976: 123, author’s translation)<sup>2</sup>.

Therefore, ‘solid liquidity’ as an unceasing movement producing objective validity and dissolving it anew in a never-ending cycle is not only a feature of modern social institutions but must be seen as a general character of life (Fitz, 2016). Yet, for Blumenberg money as an object of ‘philosophical inquiry’ also represents the element that links the two leading questions of Simmel’s cognitive interest: the theory of values and the theory of life (Blumenberg, 1976: 123). In both cases, for Simmel it was a matter of critique of the predominant philosophical debates of his time. On the one hand, his focus was the quarrel about the theory of culture values between Dilthey’s hermeneutical method (1883) and the Neo-Kantian foundation programmes of Windelband (1894/1924) and Rickert (1896–1902) at the end of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, the object of critical inquiry became the explosive fascination for Bergson’s life philosophy at the beginning of the twentieth century. Simmel’s study on the monetary economy would hold together the assessment of the two questions and lead into their synthesis thanks to an innovative approach. This is at least the result of Blumenberg’s metaphorological scrutiny of Simmel’s work.

The disclosure of the leading metaphors, which characterize thought allows, according to Blumenberg, the assertion of its content of verity. In the case of Simmel’s metaphors, it becomes evident that an answer to the questions of the definition of values and life can only be found in terms of the modalities whereby human beings construct their common social world. As Simmel points out in the introductory chapter of *Soziologie* in 1908, in modern times, philosophical anthropology in the classical meaning of the term is no longer possible unless it takes the form of a

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<sup>2</sup> „Die Charakteristiken von Stadien eines Prozesses, dessen Dynamik hier wie dort immanent ist: Erstarrung und Liquidität, Gestalt und Auflösung, Festhalten und Verschwinden, Institution und Freiheit, Nivellierung und Individualität“.

sociology. The quantity and quality of social relationships, which individuals are compelled to entertain in complex societies, changed their way of life so dramatically that the assessment of every issue concerning humanity has to be grounded on a theory of society (GSG 11: 13 f.). Yet, following Blumenberg the modern quantification and objectification induced by the monetary economy suggested for Simmel at the same time a wider scope of freedom and emancipation for the individual, so that he does not follow the path of an ideological cultural critique but points out the constitutive ambivalence of modernity. In particular, this aspect is expressed in Simmel's analysis of the role of 'formal free work' in the capitalist economy, where the reference to Marx's historical materialist conception of the category is evident, as Blumenberg points out (Blumenberg, 1976: 130). Here, it is interesting to note the following aspect. Blumenberg seems to know very well that the missing link between the theory of money and life must lie in Marx's critique of political economy. Yet, he does not develop this point.

Marx defines 'social activity' (*Tätigkeit*) as the decisive anthropological characteristic that distinguishes human beings from animals. Human persons produce their life together, so that the 'production process of life' – and for Marx that means the economy – has to be made the object of inquiry for the theory of society. Accordingly, the truth about human life cannot be found in the prevailing value systems or worldviews of an epoch but in the way in which humans cooperate in the economic production system. This is the grounding assumption of Marx's materialistic conception of history (Marx and Engels, 1990: 21). In this context the process of production and circulation of commodities, and thereby the rise of money as the central integrating institution of market societies represent the most authentic expression of human life. This decisive turn in the theory of society is taken very seriously by all the representatives of so-called classical sociology. Yet, the common purpose of Durkheim, Simmel, Tönnies and Weber is to show that the process of the production of human life, and thus the economy, is grounded on specific social mechanisms that must become the

object of a social science that cannot be restricted to a critique of political economy.

In Simmel's research programme the inquiry into the social preconditions for the rise of the monetary economy thereby becomes the necessity of constructing "a new storey beneath historical materialism" (GSG 6: 13; Simmel, 2004: 54). Sociology has to show how subjective processes of valuation first become objective through social interaction and exchange, and are then subordinated to the institutionalized processes of valuation produced by money. This is the research programme of the two sections of *The Philosophy of Money*. Starting from individuals' social action and their appreciation of objects' material value, on the one hand, Simmel analyses the conditions enabling the development of money as a societal institution ('Analytical part': GSG 6: 23–371). On the other hand, he assesses the consequences that the rise of the monetary economy induces for the conduct of life and for individuals' personalities ('Synthetic part': GSG 6: 375–716). Firstly, we encounter an analysis of the development of modern social structures starting from the assessment of social action, and secondly an analysis of the consequences that the established social structure has on the shaping of social action. This development of Marx's research programme in two opposite directions of sociological inquiry allows us to explain, on the one hand, what social preconditions are needed for the rise of money as a societal institution, and on the other which consequences its existence has on social life.

The concept of life is thus extended so that it overcomes its limitation to the societal domain of the economy. The complete societal process that produces the common life of human individuals constitutes the object of sociology. The economy is not diminished in its importance for the structuration of social relationships. Yet, it is embedded analytically in a wider definition of the 'process of production of human life'. Yet, this extension of the scope of inquiry for the social sciences required a long series of studies about the different domains of modern societies. Simmel

concentrated his work on this task in the years around the publication of the *Soziologie* in 1908. After the economy and the social spheres, politics, art, religion and eroticisms also became the object of sociological research. At the end of this work phase, it is understandable that Simmel felt the need to link together the manifold results of his inquiries. The issue at stake was to understand if an anthropology could be possible under the conditions of societal differentiation which characterize the human process of life production and reproduction in modernity. The task was to develop an anthropology that was capable mainly of being a sociology of the human way of life: in short a 'sociological anthropology'.

Yet, the difficulty for the realisation of this project during the *Belle Époque* and before the catastrophe of World War I was that the debate on human nature was dominated by Bergson's philosophy of *durée*. Bergson preached the necessity of escaping from the modern societal complexity that 'perverted' the human perception of the world through spatial forms to find a rescue in the secure harbour of intimacy, i.e. the sole perception of the irrational temporal flow of consciousness. However, only one side of the modern homo duplex in the Durkheimian sense could therefore be saved (Durkheim, 2005). In other words, the focus was on the individual of the second sociological *a priori* who understands that he is something other than his social roles (GSG 11: 51), yet not the individual who is actively engaged in the common construction of the social world. The cultural synthesis between social role and personality, between the creativity of social action and the logic of social structure was judged as being impossible, so negating de facto the possibility of the third *a priori* of sociation (GSG 11: 59). Simmel could not stand by this conclusion. His sociological research showed a different way for dealing with the conflict of modern culture. Accordingly, no sociological anthropology could be developed without a critique of the philosophy of life. In Simmel's mind this required venturing into Bergson's terrain and developing an alternative concept of life (Fitzi 2002).

Simmel admired Bergson's polemic against the predominant positivistic worldview, which postulated that any matters of social, cultural and psychological science could be explained only by using the quantitative and experimental methods of modern physics. The complexity of social reality was in danger of being extremely simplified through a reductionist project whose only interest was to establish a canonical hierarchy amongst the modern sciences. The understanding of society and culture called for the development of a different methodology. Yet, this had to take into account the fact that social and cultural forms cannot be simply considered as a perversion of an alleged authentic human way of life, because human beings produce and utilize those forms as a means of their self-realisation. The problem was, therefore, to explain how the sociocultural forms are produced by human activity, why they then become independent and exploit social action, and how they are dissolved anew in the social process of the production of human life. The central 'metaphorical ascertainment' of Simmel's late work could be formulated in these terms. Having recognized its structural homogeneity with the earlier inquiry into the monetary economy is a merit of Blumenberg's metaphorological assessment of Simmel's thought. Yet, the systematic interest of Simmel's late life and forms metaphor is to show that its structure not only characterizes the societal process of human life but also life in its wider sense. The paradigmatic extension of the *durée* to the remaining domains of biological and physical life constituted the core of Bergson's research programme in the *Évolution créatrice* (1907/1994). The claim that every expression of life from the mind to the universe is *durée* constituted the reason for the huge success of Bergson's philosophy in the *Belle Époque*. The task of Simmel's critique became, therefore, to show that Bergson only evidenced one side of the life-phenomenon, the Eraclitean one. Yet an account of the role of forms for life was still missing.

From the unicellular organism to the complex creature, from the individual content of consciousness to the most sophisticated work of art and from the ephemeral social relationship to the



institutionalized social structure, life is determined by the fact that it can only subsist as an individual form. This realisation constitutes Simmel's crucial critique of Bergson's philosophy of life. The dynamic and irrational flow of life, its vitalist aspect, amounts to only one half of its essence. Life means growing, temporal flowing and even experienced temporality, in the sense of Bergson's *durée*, yet it can exist empirically only if it constitutes a 'living form'. To understand the whole of life, therefore, a theory of reciprocal dependence is necessary along with the conflict between life and forms, so permitting an explanation of how abstract life becomes concrete living form; how it overcomes its current form and how it builds a new one, in a never-ending vital cycle. Accordingly, Simmel's last work, *The View of Life* (GSG 16: 209–425; Simmel, 2015), is characterized by the predominance of the metaphor of life *and* forms. Life is not only 'more-life' (*Mehr-Leben*), meanwhile it is 'more-than-life' (*Mehr-als-Leben*), so that it can only be considered complete if the theory of life takes into account both aspects (GSG 16: 232).

The same order of reflections applies for Simmel to the life of society as a dynamic synthesis between the spontaneous needs of social action and the principle of reproduction, which characterizes social structure. Society consists of a multiplicity of structured relationships between very different individuals who pursue highly diverse goals, and it has to find out how to endure as a consistent social group. Accordingly, for Simmel the central epistemological challenge of sociology is to understand how society is possible as an 'objective form of subjective consciousnesses' (GSG 11: 41). In this proposition, which is taken from Simmel's *Soziologie* of 1908, the vital problem of modern society already finds expression. Sociology has to explain how completely different, yet equally entitled personalities can become an organic unity that can subsist and reproduce itself. Understanding the relationship between social life and societal forms from a scientific point of view, therefore, requires a complex analytical questioning of the manifold relationships of sociation. The research programme of Simmel's

sociology regrouped the most significant inquiries in the variations of the process that structures the common human life in perennial social forms. That was the analytical result of the inquiries collected in the *Soziologie* of 1908 (GSG 11). The challenge was yet to link the studies about the different societal domains together like art, religion, politics, economy etc. as different expressions of the same process of production of social life in one theoretical approach.

In fact, the manifold expressions of human creativity represent as many ways to cope with the tension-fraught relationship between individual life and sociocultural forms as requested by the third *a priori* of sociation (GSG 11: 59). Art, for example, can express the dynamic relationship between the spontaneity of the social actors and the complexity of the social forms that their interaction assumes in an immediate way by directly transposing it into images. According to Simmel, the best historical example of the artistic representation for the unity of disparate social lives in a common form is given by Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (1498) in the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan (GSG 7: 304–309). Here, artistic creativity is capable of expressing the very different reactions of the disciples just after the moment when Jesus pronounced the sentence, 'One of you will betray me'. Yet, in the same way, the fresco represents the dynamic unity of the possible human reactions of consternation following the announcement and so it shows the full variety of human life in unitary form. Thus, with one image Leonardo is able to exemplify the complex dialectics of life and forms within a social unity and immediately bring it to expression. The analysis of Leonardo's *Last Supper* provides one example for the heuristic potential of the metaphorical language of Simmel's so-called philosophy of life, published on February 22, 1905, and tracing back the dialectics between individual action and social forms. This contribution opens the debate about the way societal relationships as a whole can be made to an object of inquiry from the viewpoint of this analytical approach. Accordingly, the question must be asked about the meaning of the life-and-forms metaphor in terms of sociological theory.

## Qualitative social differentiation

Under the influence of Parsons' thought, contemporary sociology refers to functional differentiation as the modern form of social differentiation (Parsons, 1951). The idea is that society develops different domains that are specialized in delivering a particular performance to the rest of society, so that each societal domain can be assigned to a specific 'function of society' as a whole. Society is seen as a living organism consisting of a number of organs that cooperate to assure the life and wealth of the whole, as the biology-inspired sociology of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had already argued (for instance by Schäffle, 1875–1878; or Spencer, 1876/1882–1885). Classical sociologists like Durkheim, Simmel or Weber have a different understanding of the modern societal differentiation. At the centre of their attention is the fact that highly differentiated societies tend to give rise to societal domains that follow an autonomous logic. The process is seen as a contingent societal phenomenon that does not follow any natural law, including evolutionary biology, so that no axiomatic assumptions can be made about the relationships that persist between the different societal domains. Neither the biological-functional character of society as a living being, nor a predetermined harmony between societal domains, nor conflict, can become the unquestioned axiomatic premise of the sociological theory of differentiation. Classical sociological theories, therefore, are theories of 'qualitative societal differentiation' and not of functional differentiation.

Simmel develops his analysis of qualitative social differentiation in the context of a study on religion, namely in *Die Religion*, which he wrote in 1906 at the request of his pupil Martin Buber for the series *Die Gesellschaft* (GSG 10: 39–118). In highly differentiated societies, social life is subordinated to a number of external powers (GSG 5: 560–582). The result is a wide fragmentation of the personality of the social actors, whose different domains are led by the autonomous logic of the social circles, with which they are linked. Apparently, and this was the result of the analysis in *The*

*Philosophy of Money*, there is no escape from the modern fragmentation of life as it concerns the social actors (GSG 6: 446 ff.). However, a different perspective of analysis shows that the ‘creativity of social action’ has the potential to overcome the modern human condition by regrouping all the contents of life experience under a particular approach to the world.

This sense-giving attitude, which is an expression of the cultural work induced by the third *a priori* of sociation, does not grant an automatic reversal of the fragmentation of modern life. Yet, it can overcome it under specific conditions, because the social actors can choose a ‘predominant logic’ for ruling *their* own social action, so that the fragmented contents of social reality are reordered under the particular perspective of politics, or religion, economy, art and so on (GSG 10: 39 ff.). This grasp of social action from the point of view of a specific logic represents a way of realizing the societal form of life, so characterizing the individuals, with consequences that also influence the ordering of social structure, because the intersection of the different social circles in which the social actors are active acquires a completely different complexion (GSG 11: 59).

The task of sociology is therefore to reconstruct how social action produces its different logics, and how these become autonomous by constituting objective domains of social structure. For these reasons, Simmel’s cultural sociology provides an action theory based on an explanation of the continuous establishment, depletion and change of qualitative social differentiation in complex societies. Following the scheme of the sociological *a priori*, different subjective logics guide social action by producing the objects of different domains of socially determined experience. The products of the cultural work then gather to form clusters of the objective culture and develop an own logic, which claims to be followed by the social actors (GSG 5: 560–582). Social action stances, however, can differently relate the objectified contents of social life together by following diverse logics. The result is a permanent tension between the subjective logic of action creativity and the objective logic of the social structure, which characterizes qualitative

differentiated societies and builds the core of Simmel's sociological theory of culture.

Complex societies never develop one, static and perennial hypostasized social structure, whose functioning can be traced back to a pre-established metaphor borrowed from other scientific domains. Rather, they consist of multiple different competing perspectives about the shaping of social structure and struggle for predominance. Accordingly, no emergence axiomatic like Niklas Luhmann's approach can grant the starting point of sociological theory (1984). Social structure is a magmatic material in continuous development and can only persist thanks to the repeated reordering interventions from the side of the creativity of social action, so no systemic autopoiesis is possible, unless this is in the creative fantasy of the social ontologists. Consequently, the goal of Simmel's middle work phase starting around 1908 was to show how the tension-fraught dynamics between the logics of social action and social structure develops in the different domains of culture, and to explain it as a conflict between social life and societal forms.

### **The logic of social life forms: conflict and synthesis**

In the sociological epistemology, which Simmel provides in the *Soziologie* of 1908, he underlines the fact that human beings always live in a tension between individual life and collective social forms, so that they can never be confined to privacy nor completely socialized (GSG 11: 42–61). This assumption constitutes a central tenet of Simmel's sociological theory, although in a more generalized form it becomes one of the grounding theses for the anthropological foundation of the theory of culture, which he presents in his late writing: *The View of Life* (GSG 16: 209–425; Simmel, 2015). An individual human life can never be completely consumed by the social relationships in which the person participates. To this extent, the integration of the social actors into the social fabric can be successful, only if the former can combine socialized and intimate fields of the personality in a meaningful synthesis. Thus, the issue arises as to whether the qualities of the

objective social order harbour nuances that can make individuals their bearers. The epistemological preconditions of the sociation process are rooted in the fact that the individual is placed in a particular situation in which he can combine the opposing consciousness flows of his being involved in the sociation process and existing independently. The necessity of establishing this connection constitutes Simmel's third *a priori* of sociology (GSG 11: 59).

His classical expression is given by the secularized idea of 'vocation' which, in Weber's eyes, was fundamental for the development of the modern conception of professional work (Weber, 1988a: 63 ff.). To express it in Simmel's language: on the one hand, the objective structure of society prepares anonymous roles, which the random individual can occupy, and on the other hand, the individual endeavours to occupy a social role by a sense of his 'inner calling'. Merging the individual qualification with a socially relevant function within the objective fabric of society thus constitutes a necessary precondition for social integration. About ten years later, *The View of Life* proposes an outline anthropology that is to be seen as a deepening of Simmel's sociological epistemology, but also as the theoretical attempt to unite the theories of the disparate domains of qualitative differentiated societies within a single theoretical foundation of human action theory (GSG 16: 209–425; Simmel, 2015). In *The View of Life*, Simmel extends his sociological epistemology from the pilot study about society to the whole complex of different cultural spheres, starting from the manifold 'preconditions of human life experience', i.e. from the *a priori* that give rise to such spheres.

The starting point and core of Simmel's late paradigm is the definition of the 'anthropological structure of experience' in terms of the concept of limit (*Grenze*) (GSG 16: 212 f.). Human beings are to be seen as 'limit-setting beings' because their attitude to the world is determined by the fact that in every dimension of life experience they find themselves constantly moving between opposing limits. This applies to the perception of time and space, to aesthetic and

moral values, but also to the fact of living in a tension between the socialized and non-socialized spheres of the personality. Those opposite limits represent the means whereby human beings locate themselves properly and give a form to their potentially infinite and disorienting domain of life-experience. This, however, is only half the truth.

The subsistence of experience-limits is fundamental for the life of human beings, yet only under the condition that the individual limits can be steadily overcome by establishing new ones (GSG 16: 215). The dynamic process of the third *a priori*, continuously re-establishing and redefining the merging of social action and social structure in a meaningful synthesis, is then seen as an anthropological precondition not only of sociation but also of human life in general. Instead of merely being a category of sociological epistemology, the concept 'relating in a meaningful form' different flows of social life becomes the main instrument for the analysis of all the domains of culture in qualitative differentiated societies. Consequently, in the terminology of *The View of Life*, the decisive epistemological issue becomes how to explain from a consistent perspective what makes a 'world' possible as the sum of the objects of the different domains of culture. According to the epistemological shift of Simmel's late sociological anthropology, 'world' not only consists of its contents, but also of the respective forms *a priori* that produce and connect the single contents to autonomous cultural spheres (GSG 16: 238). Accordingly, every domain of culture has to be considered as having its own *a priori*, consisting of particular form-giving procedures moulding social life, so that the task of cultural sociology becomes to seize and correlate these procedures in a unitary theory of the construction of qualitative differentiated societies. The fragmentary character of modern life can be traced back to the anthropologically determined structuring of the cultural and social world. The rhythm of sociation in complex societies compels social actors to move constantly between different domains of social life, exposing them to the risks of social pathologies, and above all to alienation. Simmel's cultural

theory shows how difficult the integration processes become for social actors that have to realize the related cultural work in qualitative differentiated societies.

They must steadily cope with two uneven flows of consciousness: on the one hand, the objective contents of culture and, on the other hand, the subjective creativity of social action. Hence, in complex societies, the amount of objective cultural contents and external expectations acting upon the individual gain such momentum that the single social actor can never cope (GSG 5: 560–582). The crisis of culture develops to a global phenomenon leading to a general entropy of societal creativity. Within the domain of culture in general, any new synthesis or style trend no longer seems possible. Life rebels against culture forms, or more specifically social action rebels against social structure, but is no longer able to produce new societal structures (GSG 16: 181–207). This attitude, however, represents nothing other than a way of escaping the conflict of modern culture without overcoming its crisis.

## **The Conflict of Culture**

In a developed market economy, the objective valuation of commodities becomes the precondition for their subjective valuation. This phenomenon is part of the overlapping reification process of modern societies that Marx traced back to the so-called ‘fetishism of commodities’ (Marx, 1887: 61 ff.). In his theory of cultural reification, Simmel develops this insight by extending it beyond the economy to the tension-fraught relationship between the social actors and the institutionalized role models, which they have to play in the different domains of modern society. The multifaceted objectivation of the symbolic social orders makes cultural reification an overall phenomenon that social action has to cope with. Over and above that, however, for Simmel a different societal development must be taken into account that generalizes a further aspect of Marx’s theory of modern capitalism to a structural



dimension of cultural conflict (GSG 16: 181–207). This concerns the shaping of culture in its entirety.

Simmel's diagnosis about the development of culture in the phase of the European peace between 1872 and 1914 was sobering, because the creative cycle of cultural innovation seemed to him to have come to a substantial stagnation<sup>3</sup>. The historical process that time and again produces new lifestyles, new cultural and artistic movements, and eventually new societal forms substituting the older ones, seemed to rotate on itself. Entering this context of analysis, Simmel pointed out that Marx was the first social scientist who elaborated a theory of the historical development, by taking into account the ongoing tension between the societal impulse for change and the tendency to the pure reproduction of established social forms. Publishing his essay on "The Conflict of Modern Culture" during the last year of World War I, in 1918, Simmel could not nominate Marx because of the pressure of censorship, but he precisely reported his materialist conception of history (GSG 16: 184 f.). Marx's merit was, for Simmel, to detect within the economic domain the motor for historical change in the shape of a conflict between the productive forces and the relations of production. Marx's theory of the economic conflict, however, had to be extended to the whole of society and understood as an inquiry into the conflict between productive cultural forces and established cultural forms in the various qualitative differentiated domains of society. Moreover, in the face of the substantial cultural stagnation of modernity, Marx's forecast of a dialectical evolution toward new relations of production had to be critically assessed. Simmel did not believe that the 1917 Russian Revolution would provide the expected breakthrough of history and referred instead to the empirical evidence of the changed quality of the cultural conflict in

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<sup>3</sup> This aspect cannot be further developed here. Of course, the question is whether Simmel's diagnosis took into account all the potential of the culture of his time. This is a subject for a separate comparative study of Simmel's work on the artistic avant-garde and that of some of his most brilliant and relatively unknown pupils.

Western Europe as the crucial and critical development of modernity.

In the different domains of society, the productive forces of cultural life showed an ongoing tendency to refuse every coagulation in a new cultural form (GSG 16: 185). No longer was there to be observed a struggle of the productive forces against the obsolete forms of production, but rather their struggle against every possible form that they could assume, and even against the principle of form itself. Simmel considered this attitude as the central characteristic of the different cultural tendencies of the 'European life' that were manifest from 1872 to 1914, but for him the artistic movement which incorporated the rebellion of the cultural forces against form in the most typical way was Expressionism (GSG 16: 190 f.). Cultural conflict pointed out the circumstance that modernity showed no clear line of development; rather, it seemed to be trapped in an overall condition of substantial stagnation that was only set in motion again thanks to major destructive crises, as had happened during World War I. This disturbing novelty showed for Simmel that a post-dialectical and post-evolutionist theory of history was necessary to understand the development of modernity.

Simmel contributed to the effort of grasping theoretically the complexity of modern societal change by developing his life and forms paradigm. A conception of societal history that is not unidirectional, evolutionist or vulgar dialectic had to contemplate the empirical evidence that societal change is discontinuous and intermittent. Phases of development alternate with periods of stagnation, yet also of destruction of societal and cultural achievements, as the history between 1871 and 1918 had showed with sufficient power of persuasion. Since the economic boom of the German *Kaiserreich* in the 1870s, the capitalist production cyclically delivered an overflow of production and ended in major economic crisis with dreadful social consequences. World War I then brought a wide destruction of human, social, material, yet also ideal goods, and above all the loss of the ideal of Europe, which for Simmel was the leading value for the Republic of Letters in the *Belle*

*Époque.* After the war, European society had to reconstruct itself starting from a completely new basis. Sociology could contribute to this effort by inquiring into the ongoing conflict between the creativity of social action and the reproduction, and respectively the stagnation of the established social forms. This was the sociological meaning of the life and forms metaphor.

## Conclusions

Modern societies, which develop a qualitative differentiation in manifold competing spheres of culture with autonomous logics, experience a growing tendency to uncontrolled conflicts between social life and societal forms. Furthermore, both on the level of social action and of social structure, different logics compete to shape social life. This characteristic phenomenon of modern societies, which Weber named the polytheism of values (Weber, 1988b: 603–605), stays at the forefront of Simmel's theory of qualitative societal differentiation. For Simmel, however, the most striking development characterizing modernity leads to an additional diagnostic. The creativity of social life is no longer capable of coagulating in innovative societal forms. Therefore, at the end of the day qualitative differentiated societies cannot even develop a conflict between persisting and forthcoming life forms because the building of sociocultural syntheses experiences a deep entropy and flows finally into an irresolvable stalemate in the dynamics between social action and social structure.

The modern *conditio humana* comprises an overall fragmentation of social relationships, of cultural contents, as well as of the personality of the social actors that is accompanied by a substantial sclerosis of the established social forms. Accordingly, every attempt to construct a new synthesis out of the fragments of social life must come to terms with the quantitative and qualitative complexity of the objectified social forms and cultural contents. It must melt them anew in the dynamics of creative social action and construct innovative societal forms. Yet, this transformation never comes about as an automatic product of the objective dynamics of

complex societies. This analytical result grounds the actuality of Simmel's life and forms metaphors for sociological theory. Sociology can contribute to the understanding of the pathologies of modernity, of its peculiar conflict between the creativity of social life and the rigidity that characterizes the reproduction of the societal forms, if it overcomes the naïve viewpoints of the philosophy of history. Modernity is neither progress, nor decadence, nor does its development follow a predictable dialectical rhythm. Modernity unfolds in successive waves of construction of sociocultural forms, of stagnation and even of destruction of societal achievements. A sociological theory of modernity must thus be able to reconstruct the contradictory and intermittent relationships between the creativity of social action and the reproduction and transformation mechanisms of the established social forms. Simmel's systematic reflection about the double, constructive and deconstructive character of social life – the life and forms paradigm – represents a decisive theoretical contribution to a scientific understanding of modernity, and so too of the historical epoch in which we live.

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## COMMENTARIES TO FITZI

VINCENZO MELE

### **Simmel and the cultural turn**

Fitzzi's article *Life and Forms. The sociological meaning of a metaphor* is a persuasive interpretation of Simmel's social thought. The author's intention is to demonstrate that Simmel's work has a coherence that goes beyond the conventional distinctions and etiquette (positivism, neokantianism, philosophy of life). Simmel's "philosophical consistency" – following Hans Blumenberg – can be grasped if we take "life and forms" as central metaphor. From this perspective Simmel's *lebensphilosophische Soziologie* (life philosophy sociology) can contribute to the understanding of the pathologies of modernity, of its conflict between the creativity of social life and the rigidity of social forms. This paper offers some matter of reflection from the methodological point of view – on the importance of metaphorical thinking – and for the relevance of a possible strong program in cultural sociology.

The author's main thesis is that a closer scrutiny of Simmel's sociological theory-building demonstrates that his work takes the form of an ongoing widening of the enquiry into social reality – starting from the analysis of the social issues in a narrower sense, moving to their socio-cultural implications and premises, and finally turning to the anthropological roots of social phenomena. This interpretation shows clearly the sociological relevance of the so called metaphysical or *vitalist* writings – mainly Simmel's philosophical testament *The View of life* (1918), but also *Die Religion*, the study of 1906 requested by Simmel's pupil Martin Buber for the series *Die Gesellschaft* – often ignored by sociologists and social

theorists. This hermeneutic perspective seems to be not only philologically accurate, but also methodologically innovative. Traditionally sociologists neglected the importance of Simmel's metaphorical thinking with the goal of inscribing Simmel in the pantheon of founding father of sociological tradition. Most of hermeneutical efforts have been spent on the search of the structural variables of his sociology. Ideally, this would have put Simmel closer the Parsons' canon of the *The Structure of Social Action* (1937). On the contrary, today we are probably less obsessed from the foundation of sociology as an independent scientific discipline and we can better appreciate Simmel's complexity and the trans-disciplinary density of his thought. The new generation of Simmel scholars can finally give up with the artificial distinction of a Simmel 'sociologist' as separated by a 'philosopher', which deprives sociological imagination from the stimulus coming from metaphysics and aesthetics. This is a "living heritage" of Simmel approach: what Émile Durkheim in his critical review of the *Philosophy of Money* criticized as a form of "speculation batard"<sup>1</sup> (an eclectic approach between philosophy and science that fails to do justice to either) can be seen as a fruitful contamination and hybridation of disciplines based on analogical reasoning and metaphorical thinking. Simmel's use of metaphors, symbols and images is not casual and cannot be liquidated with the accusation of aestheticism. On the contrary, for *sociological aesthetics* understanding the distinct features of the life of the times cannot be acquired directly, but only "through symbols and examples". Here Simmel clearly delineates some of the inspiring principles of his theory of knowledge, his "aesthetic perspective", which is so peculiar to his way of looking upon the social world. This is clearly manifest in his stated intention to investigate "the typical... in what is unique, the law-like in what is fortuitous, the essence and significance of things in the superficial and the transitory" (GSG 5: 206).

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. É. Durkheim, « Simmel (Georg). – Philosophie des Geldes (Philosophie de l'argent). Leipzig, Dunker et Humblot, 1900, p. XVI-554 in – 8° », *L'Année sociologique*, Paris, Alcan, É. Durkheim (sous la dir. de), n° 5, 1902, p. 145.



“Metaphorology” (or “morphology”) can be seen as a part of what the historian Carlo Ginzburg called an “conjectural paradigm” in history and social sciences<sup>2</sup>. Ginzburg showed that morphology can be considered part of a paradigm called “conjectural”, which relies on a more flexible model of rationality and scientific rigour. Based specifically on semiotics, it began to assert itself in the human sciences in the late 19th century. The art connoisseur Giovanni Morelli, Sherlock Holmes, and Sigmund Freud showed how through its application, information considered marginal could enable understanding a deeper, otherwise unattainable reality. Simmel, as well as Kracauer, Benjamin and Adorno also set forms, dialectical images and metaphors at the centre of their complex, anti-reductionist theory of culture, which focuses on aspects neglected by conventional approaches. While traditional rationalistic historical and sociological approaches generally focus on overt aspects of culture, such as language or words, this approach thus considers those aspects of culture that are neither rational nor logical and not explicitly revealed. For this reason, this practice generally focuses on analysing everyday life – cultural expressions that are not produced by the conscious, logical mind, but are involuntary, neglected, and oppressed. Today, more than a century after the *Philosophy of Money*, the topicality of Simmel’s sociological thinking can be seen in his efforts to unify abstract theorising, object, and aesthetic representation, than in his foundation of a scientific sociology.

Another important aspect to be discussed for “Simmel’s living heritage” comes from the centrality of culture. In Fitzzi’s interpretation, culture cannot be considered as a secondary result of economic or social action, as Marx and Durkheim argue, but must be explained as the constitutive performance holding society together, by relating the logic of social structure and social action to each other. The concept of culture thus becomes the grounding

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<sup>2</sup> Ginzburg, Carlo, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

category of sociology, so that the sociology of culture cannot count as a special sociology among others, but rather becomes the central pillar of sociological theory. In other words, Fitzi through Simmel is proposing a “strong program” in the sociology of culture. Culture doesn’t count as an object of study among others for sociology but sociology is in itself “cultural sociology” since it must inquire into the mechanisms which permit these processes, by reconstructing the everyday cultural work that connects social action and social structure. The main difference between Simmel’s theory of modernity and Marx’s historical materialism is that the concept of “production process of human life” is extended as a metaphor describing the social life as a whole: not just inside the economic, but in all social sphere of politics, art, religion, eroticism. Also, the concept of “commodity fetishism” coined by Marx to describe the power of things on human beings should be extended in all fields of social, spiritual and cultural production. Instead of the dialectic between production forces and relations of production, Simmel adopts the most comprehensive “new storey beneath historical materialism” (GSG 6: 13) dialectic between “life” and “forms”. On this path for Simmel was inevitable to enter in Bergson’s terrain and developing an alternative concept of life. The difference between Simmel and Bergson lies in the concept of “form”, that allows Simmel to develop a “sociological anthropology” and not a merely philosophical in the classical sense of the term. The whole life of society can be represented as the dialectic – without the third moment of synthesis – between the spontaneous and creative dynamic of social action (“more life”) and the principle that ensures the reproduction of social life, the social forms. Social life cannot exist and reproduce itself without forms, objectivations (“more than life”). Society becomes possible – this is the fundamental epistemological question for Simmel – only as an “objective form of subjective consciousness”. Fitzi interestingly and appropriately uses an artistic example to show the heuristic potential of the life-form metaphor: Leonardo Da Vinci’s last supper. The figurative genius of Leonardo is able to represent the extreme varieties of human reactions following Jesus announcement (“One of you will

betray me”) in an unitary form called “last supper”. This conception, so fundamental to understanding Simmel’s vision of modern society, is clearly translated in sociological terms in a little-known, yet extremely significant, essay devoted to the *Sociology of the Meal* (1910) (GSG 12: 140-147). The meal represents one of the main forms of *sociability* – one of those particular forms of sociability in which there is direct contact with the *stomach*, so to speak, and thus with absolutely immediate, egoistical, primary needs. In a civilized cultural form, such primary needs (or better, *the* primary need to feed oneself) are part of the *lengthening teleological chain of ends* that characterizes modern culture and whose main symbol is money. Through money such needs are no longer the determinant of social behaviors. ‘Meal sociability’ involves a *sublimation* of primary needs such that they are no longer even recognizable as such: the activity of feeding oneself becomes a *form of association* whose end is divorced from its content. For this reason, Simmel can (as he does in his fundamental, programmatic essay of 1894) build a sociology of social *forms* as distinct from the *contents* of association: it is the evolution of culture and modern society (as well as western civilization) that drives this *lengthening of the teleological chain* and therefore the separation of social forms from their finalities. In this same essay, Simmel states that “in so far as the meal becomes a sociological matter, it arranges itself in a more aesthetic, stylized and supra-individually regulated form” (GSG 12: 141).

Simmel on the contrary of Bergson was not tempted by escaping from the modern social world to find a rescue in the secure harbour of intimacy. In this sense, the focus is only to one side of the Durkheimian *Homo duplex* – namely the individual beyond his social roles. Simmel considers the fact that the objective structure of society made of anonymous roles enters in tension with the individual desire of uniqueness. The challenge of the *third apriori* of his sociology is to find a cultural synthesis between social role and personality, between the creativity of social action and the logic of social structure. In complex societies we have to face not just qualitative social differentiation, but also the conflict of culture that

for Simmel regards ontologically modernity. Highly differentiated societies tend to develop different domains that follow an autonomous logic. The result is fragmentation of personality of social actors, whose different domains are led by the autonomous logic of the social circles, with which they are linked. Even if there is no escape from modern fragmentation of life, the social actor can choose a “predominant logic” for ruling their own social action, so that the fragmented contents of social reality are reordered under a particular perspective that can belong to politics, religion, economy, art and so on. What Fitzi here highlights is the possibility of an *individual law*, a paradoxical personal form, resulting from the creative assembly and re-ordering of the different social circles in which social actors are active. In this contest – following Simmel – “the task of sociology is therefore to reconstruct how social action produces its different logics, and how these become autonomous by constituting objective domains of social structure”.

It is interesting to examine what is for Simmel the role of work to shape the modern self, as compared to the other classical sociologists. With the third apriori, Simmel – similarly to Weber – makes reference to a common theoretical background that views the human being as a creature with originally rational potential, who is faced with the task of becoming a personality by means of consciously chosen life behaviour. That similarity is evident in the parallelism between Simmel’s (1900) interest in the concept of the “style of life” (*Der Stil des Lebens*) – to which he devoted the final part of one of his major works, *The Philosophy of Money* – and Weber’s research on the “life conduct” (*Lebensführung*) that arose in Western rationalistic culture, which he laid out mainly in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–1905). This implies a lasting transcending of the self from life and from natural experience through a responsible decision based on values and meanings. In this context, work, as a “fixed ideal line uniting the person to a life content” (GSG 6: 597) can carry out a decisive role. Working life can become the major instrument to forge a consistent personality, as shown by the sociological reconstruction of the historical

development of ascetic Protestantism. Simmel believes that work still represents one of the major factors determining modern individuals' ability (or inability) to formulate personal, stable identities that enable them to become fully socialized. However, we can find here a difference between Simmel and Weber on the diagnosis of the contemporary cultural crisis. Weber – in his famous lectures on *Politics as vocation* and *Science as vocation* (1917) – remained convinced that the only way to overcome the cultural crisis of his time was to re-establish an understanding of work as service and, consequently, resolve the problem of identity and inner strength by shaping the self into the kind of personality made possible by service in the spiritual discipline of the calling. For Weber, work, in the sense of a methodical, rational “life conduct” inspired by the “demon” of inner vocation, represents the final attempt to save the self from modernity’s inherent drive towards dissolution of the individual. Simmel on the contrary was aware that the modern subject is too fragmented and that the creativity of social life is no longer able to coagulate in a dominant social form. In his many investigations of the metropolitan scene – on sociability, fashion, eroticism, love, adventure – Simmel seems to have observed an aspect that was later to become a characteristic trait of our highly diversified society: individual personality and social personality can no longer coincide entirely with “work”.

Obviously, Simmel never proposed a specific, unequivocal solution to such problems. Faced with the tragedy that necessarily arises for the individual, torn between being like everybody else (social role) and at the same time being above all and incomparably one’s own self, he did not find any arrangement, whether ideological or utopian, to achieve in a future socialist societal order. Nor did he view the irreversible individualism of his time with particular optimism or peace of mind. Especially in the final phase of his thought, Simmel seems to have given up on this contradiction as insoluble and to entrust the solitary, detached construction of an individual life style with the realization of a self that can also have general value and social recognisability. In this sense, the *blasé*, the

adventurer, or the individual who looks for peace of mind in the aesthetics of distance are the variants or the possibilities of a individual who is above all philosophical, in short, someone in whom even Simmel can recognize himself.

MAURO MAGATTI

### **Life, form and individual law. Simmel and the contemporary sociological agenda**

It is because of his theoretical philosophical and anthropological thickness that contemporary sociologists - focused on empirically-circumscribed objects of study - struggle to deal with Simmel's sociology. Well aware of Simmel's complex theoretical trajectory, G. Fitzi correctly highlights the profound as well as dynamic unity of his thought. An aspect often undervalued by many interpreters who end up only partly grasping the work of the German sociologist.

The contribution I would like to bring to this debate stems from this assumption: understanding the social world in which we live, in Simmel's view - with all his complex articulation - is still extremely useful, probably even more useful today than one century ago.

The starting point is Simmel's overlooked idea that the social realm is a very peculiar 'thing', being qualified by the irreducibility of subjectivity to its social context. According to his 'second a priori', in fact, human beings are always members of a society and yet, at the same time, irreducible to it. This means that, though culturally embedded, individuals are never fully socialized. Or, to put it differently, human life is never completely absorbed by the social relationships in which it takes place and flourishes. As G. Fitzi put it, the effort of establishing a relationship between the objective logic of social structure and the subjective logic of social action represents, therefore, the core of the never-ending production process of society.

A stimulating interpretation of such crucial suggestion by Simmel comes from Romano Guardini. In his book titled “The Polar Opposition. For a Philosophy of the Concrete-living” (1997[1925]), Guardini holds that human life takes place in a field made up of conflicting and yet intrinsically-linked poles, so that the one can only be thought in relation to the other. We know that Guardini knew Simmel’s work. In a sense, it could be said that in this book Guardini developed and generalized Simmel’s intuition - the intrinsic tension between life and form - into the general notion of “polar tension”, viewed as a powerful dynamism rooted in the relationship between irreducible and yet interrelated principles (such as, for instance, action and structure, individual and society, life and form etc.). A polar tension intimately distinguishing the human condition.

Accordingly, social life - which by definition is characterized by an intrinsic dynamism - takes place in a field where contrasting (polar) forces are in constant tension without the possibility of settling for a final synthesis. Rather provisional *equilibria* (‘forms’, in Simmel’s term) are continuously established; and yet doomed to be overcome.

Interestingly enough, in Simondon’s words, these provisional equilibria - empirically observable - are “metastable” points of balance (Simondon, 1989), which means they are neither stable (as in solid institutions) nor unstable (as in liquid relations): rather, they are endowed within a relative stability that contains the very premises of their own overcoming. The consequences are wide ranging: beyond any dialectical counter-position, sociology should be better qualified as the discipline studying the polar - and therefore complex - relationship between contrasting forces. It is exactly the deep and ever-changing negotiation between micro and macro, subjective and objective culture, individualization and socialization that is at stake in the sociological analysis.

All along his contribution, Fitzi suggests that it is this crucial methodological compass the reason why Simmel is so relevant in

understanding contemporary societies. I deeply agree with such a statement.

It is not by chance that the most influential contemporary sociologist - Zygmunt Bauman - was a follower of Simmel (2014). In fact, to a careful scrutiny, Bauman's entire analytical framework is based on the never-ending interchange between subjective experiences and structural reorganization. As Bauman repeatedly stated, it is exactly by keeping the subjective experience and the structural organization tied together that sociology may succeed in understating social life.

Apparently, we live in a highly individualized society. And, indeed, under many respects, this is certainly true.

And yet, Simmel theoretical move - from "how society is possible?" to "how individuality is possible?" - is still the most effective one. As we know, in the last century social differentiation advanced pervasively on the global scale. Social organization - based on more and more globalized technical economic and bureaucratic apparatuses - is nowadays increasingly pervasive (though invisible), progressively including the subject himself - his bodies and his psyche - in the systemic organization. Digitalization pushes this powerful tendency a step forward, paving the way for new, more radical forms of social control and domination.

At the same time, at the cultural level, the creation of what Luciano Floridi (2017) calls the "infosphere" tends to pulverize every cultural meaning - so that 'the multitude of cultural elements', as Simmel put it, cannot be assimilated any longer by individuals and communities - so that the process of sense-making is becoming even more difficult. The result is not just a critical tension between objective and subjective culture, but also the systematic reduction of the self-transcendence movement. Change is ubiquitously evoked and innovation is a mantra. Yet, the result is simply the search for 'quantitative more-life' to the detriment of the search for 'qualitative more-than-life'.



It is because of this metamorphosis that, paradoxically, in a time when individualism is highly celebrated, the same possibility of the individual is called into question. From this point of view, Simmel's analysis perfectly fits contemporary societies.

If such the case, the Simmelian heritage in highly differentiated societies should imply not only focusing on individual pathologies but also, and may be above all, on strategies of human resilience - that is on concrete modes individuals adopt to deal with the surrounding social order. As M. Martinelli suggests, in a Simmelian vein, today - exactly like one century ago - the main sociological question is: is still possible to have a meaningful life in advanced societies?

To answer this question, the irreducibility of the human being to his social context - a pillar of Simmel's view - is the essential theoretical starting point. And in fact, human resilience may be properly understood by recognizing more explicitly the proximity between Georg Simmel and Hannah Arendt.

For Arendt, as well as for Simmel, the subject is always able to interrupt the causal chain of the social causes and conditions in which any action takes place, being able to modify and free itself from the course of the events, interrupting the 'causality chain'. Interestingly enough, H. Arendt, with such capacity in mind, qualifies the human as the being 'born to begin' (1958). In fact, it is exactly through creation that self-transcendence - the concrete and empirically observable consequence of such an irreducibility - becomes socially and individually evident and relevant.

This is important for two reasons:

- i) Focussing on creation is the way not only to reduce the obscurity of the notion of freedom, but also to give substance to the Simmel's idea, also quoted by H.P. Müller: "we are bounded in every direction and we are bounded in no direction". In fact, our creations may be viewed as the most powerful way out from ourselves since, as Simmel noted, "by cultivating things (we love), we cultivate ourselves";

ii) it is through his creative initiative that individuals establish new social relations and elaborate new meanings. That is why it is exactly the act of creation that allows for understanding freedom not as a solipsistic activity but as the ultimate source of social life (and of its own quality). That is the reasons why Bauman, in a pure Simmelian vein, suggests sociology should be thought of as the “science of liberty” (Bauman, 2014).

In Simmel perspective, the re-composition between social differentiation and subjectivity may take place in the construction of new, dynamic social forms. In fact, as Fitzi writes: “The creativity of social action has the potential to overcome the modern human condition by regrouping all the contents of life experience under a particular approach to the world. This sense-giving attitude (...) does not grant an automatic reversal of the fragmentation of modern life. Yet, it can overcome it under specific conditions, because the social actors can choose a ‘predominant logic’ for ruling *their* social own action, so that the fragmented contents of social reality are reordered under the particular perspective of politics, or religion, economy, art and so on” (see also the Simmel “Gesamtausgabe”, 1989-2015).

These considerations are essential to avoid a recurrent misinterpretation leading to the individualistic reduction of the “individual law”. Rather, as H.P. Müller notes, the Simmelian “individual law” is the way to give content to the concrete ‘social form’ of individuality. In Jung’s terms, individual law is the very condition allowing an effective process of ‘individuation’ (Jung, 1934).

This is exactly the perspective at the origin of a research program developed in the last few years in Milan focused on ‘social generativity’ (Magatti, 2018). Social generativity may be viewed as the social process activated by an entrepreneurial initiative (in the economic, social, political or cultural sphere) bringing something new into the world (or restoring/regenerating/recovering something already existing). Social generativity emerges in relation to the expressive drive, which ultimately moves the actor. By

proposing a different vision of the future, a solution to an unsolved problem or an original response to an unanswered need, generative social action offers a distinguishable and sustainable contribution to the surrounding social context.

That is why a 'generative' initiative is usually able to mobilize resources (human, instrumental, financial, etc.) that are essential to start and develop its own project. Once launched, a generative social action must pay attention to the instrumental and organizational dimensions. This is why a recurrent tendency towards formalization is observed. Clearly enough, in order to maintain its generative dynamics, it is essential that the instrumental/objective dimension do not overcome the original subjective meaningfulness of the initiative. A task which is always difficult to reach.

And yet, as the empirical research shows, the difficulties actors met in creating new forms of life is the way they have to develop and strengthen their capability as well as their sense-giving. That is why they continuously succeed in shaping organizations, companies, social movements and communities incorporating the generative logic.

And yet, a new boundary is thus met: at a certain point, the (individual or collective) founder faces a new and crucial dilemma: either dominate his/her own creation or enter into a different game and so capacitating the others to develop their own projects. It is clear that attachment - all through social life - may easily turn into dependency. Social generativity is an attempt to solve this dilemma. In fact, even if generativity involves subjects in asymmetrical positions (founder[s] vs. others), it does not lead to exploitation, control, paternalism, but rather to the capacitation and empowerment of the weaker/younger party. A dynamics which, as Simmel noted, is the ultimate goal human action should aim at if it does not want to betray its own origin (which is freedom).

Of course, social generativity is not the only strategy individuals may adopt to react to the systemic dominion through individuation. Indeed, there are many other ways out.

And yet, in accordance with the fundamental lesson offered by G. Simmel, our research program confirms social actors - as hard as it could be - are still able to succeed - though in a precarious way - in the complex task of sense-giving, through their own action, innovatively recreating social ties and nurturing social integration at the same time.

This is certainly good news. Above all, it suggests a new promising, fully-Simmelian agenda for future sociological research.

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