



Simmel: Bildung as the Form of Subjectivity

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Volume 23, Number 1, 2019

Simmel as Educator

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1062538ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1062538ar>

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Publisher(s)

Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN

1616-2552 (print)

2512-1022 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

D'Andrea, F. (2019). Simmel: Bildung as the Form of Subjectivity. *Simmel Studies*, 23(1), 43–66. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1062538ar>

Article abstract

This essay is composed of two parts: in the first I contend that Simmel was a representative of a cultural variant within Enlightenment modernity. Dumont has shown that there are several cultural variants born of the clash between former European traditional cultures and the modern set of universal values. This set and the variants are linked by a Wechselwirkung that modifies them all, thanks to the work of cross-representations. In the second part I argue that Simmel had German Bildung in mind when describing the shaping of subjectivity and the form of the life process and that Bildung is a cross-representation. As such it plays a major role in contemporary cultural processes which cannot be fully understood without appreciating its multidimensional complexity.

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Simmel: Bildung as the Form of Subjectivity

Abstract. This essay is composed of two parts: in the first I contend that Simmel was a representative of a cultural variant within Enlightenment modernity. Dumont has shown that there are several cultural variants born of the clash between former European traditional cultures and the modern set of universal values. This set and the variants are linked by a Wechselwirkung that modifies them all, thanks to the work of cross-representations. In the second part I argue that Simmel had German Bildung in mind when describing the shaping of subjectivity and the form of the life process and that Bildung is a cross-representation. As such it plays a major role in contemporary cultural processes which cannot be fully understood without appreciating its multidimensional complexity.

Nothing more can be attempted than to establish the beginning and the direction of an infinitely long road. The pretension of any systematic and definitive completeness would be, at least, a self-illusion. Perfection can here be obtained by the individual student only in the subjective sense that he communicates everything he has been able to see (GSG 11: 31).

Georg Simmel

1. *Wechselwirkung* and academic research

A few years ago I was beginning to think about space and corporeality and I seemed to remember having read something interesting in a book by Castañeda. It was, I found out after a more serious effort at recollection, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* ([1968] 1998), a reading from my adventurous youth that should still be somewhere in my library. I fished it out and started riffling through it. You can imagine my astonishment when I discovered, on its first page, two quotations, one by don Juan

himself, the other by... Georg Simmel! It was the very last thing I expected and it gave me the sudden feeling of that “infinitely long road” that apparently had started to unwind for me well before I knew it. When I met don Juan for the first time I was blessedly ignorant of sociology and Simmel, delving into esoterism and imagination with no clear reason in mind, just because I loved it. Now, after twenty years, I found I had taken the first step of my career following some kind of unconscious magnetism that meandered at last towards the university... Perhaps a demon’s work.

It was a quotation by Simmel that perfectly summarized my own approach to study and research and constituted the definitive answer to a large amount of criticism aimed at our author. All the periodizing, the effort to come to terms with the apparent incoherence of his trajectory, the patronizing benevolence with which he is still looked upon as a brilliant amateur and nothing more, all fell to pieces, revealing itself as a sham or perhaps a conscious move to hold off the danger. Castañeda saw it well, when he invoked Simmel’s authority to shield his heterodox research, even though I am not sure that it was protection he was looking for. Rather a provocative jest in the form of an academic tradition, something I guess Simmel would have liked. In Simmel’s words, the normative ideal of contemporary research becomes “at least a self-illusion”. At least... It could be worse than that, far worse. It could be some kind of Simmelian form crushing creativity and originality of thought for the sake of its own coherence; a stratagem exploiting this inertia to preserve a consolidated set of status advantages. It could even be a fundamental flaw in our cultural discourse. Cognitive exceptionalism has its roots in prevision and procedure. It imagines itself as the only way to understand a world built on necessary laws, on an order that needs only to be brought to light to make everything possible. What an extraordinary myth modernity conceived!

Simmel, however, had other dreams. He thought of academic research as one aspect of an individual’s life, something that had to

be carried out according to the ceaseless *Wechselwirkung* that binds one's inner life and reasoning with one's world, be it natural or social or all-encompassing, whichever seems to be the case. No external law or procedure could tell the researcher where to wander and that long road – usually a winding one – cannot be understood simply as a professional activity. It is one of several ways in which the blossoming of a single, unique existence can be described and it is deeply intertwined with every other dimension that forms the richness of life. The idea of a self-standing intellectual enquiry, based on necessary steps and questions, cold and coherent and removed from passion and curiosity, was far from Simmel.

It is this *thickness*, the fact that “the whole of life enters into each discreet action of the individual” (Levine and Silver, 2010: xx), that makes it impossible to draw straight lines between work and play, everyday life and specialized thinking, so that it could be argued that those few words are not only referred to study and research, but to life as a whole. They sketch a form. By this far-fetching metaphor, Simmel hints at the form of the life process itself, at its slow becoming more and more itself by way of tentative steps, drawbacks, fast accelerations and changes of direction and proclaims this to be his rule, the immanent logic that turns his books and investigations, however varied and chaotic they may appear, into a unique adventure full of sense and pathos.

If this is true, there are some questions that must be addressed. Simmel's reception has always been subjected to a number of clauses and conditions. Several authors tried, and still do, to preserve his image “as an impressionistic, unsystematic essayist wandering through the boulevards of science” (Levine and Silver, 2010: x), an untrustworthy, fascinating amateur. I don't think the reason why has been made explicit yet. Simmel was, and is, unsettling not only because of his eccentric genius, but because his work finds its roots in and makes visible and alive another culture, thus threatening the primacy of the dominant ideology and its claim to be the only thinkable and possible one. He has to be thwarted, lest his ideas start a chain reaction with unfathomable consequences

(D'Andrea, 2009). In the first part of the paper I will try to describe this other culture by tracing it back to German Romanticism and depicting the crucial opposition between France and Germany at the dawn of Modernity. With the aid of Louis Dumont, I will contend that the idea of a pure and unchallenged supremacy of a single cultural variant is an illusion and that, thanks to Simmel and other fierce thinkers such as Herder, strong points and traits of the German variant have become part of Western cultural discourse, reshaping it and contributing to drive it to its present crisis. In the second part, I will put forward the suggestion that one of Romanticism's most peculiar characteristics, the idea of *Bildung*, may be taken as a model for Simmel's proposal of a never-ending subjective development and that this, in turn, may be interpreted as the general form of life process.

2. Dumont's analysis of Western culture

Simmel's reception/rejection still raises some interesting issues. Often his critics are not free of his influence, whether they know it or not, but they keep on attacking his positions, belittling both his professional and human dimensions, as if they were afraid of something. I suggest that this is actually the case, that the true target of such an effort at taking down "the brightest man in Europe", as Santayana called him (Levine and Silver, 2010: x), is not only Simmel himself, but the culture he championed, showing the world its fertility and strength. Another culture, not the rationalistic, utilitarian one which claims to be the one and only Western culture and passes judgment on all those who do not fit its rules, always finding them wanting. To understand this point, one has to give up on the illusion that culture is something multifaceted and yet coherent, a homogeneous mix of values and ideals that cannot but unite the members of a group, however vast that group might be. Even the precise apparatus that categorizes subcultures, countercultures, niches and so on has the implicit task of strengthening the underlying idea that culture is a whole, capable of housing heterodox positions without going to pieces and often

harmonizing them all in the end. It is a lovely tale that serves many exigencies: it soothes existential anxiety, helps general wellbeing and offers a powerful tool of power and discipline; and yet it is only a tale. The fact that Western culture is to be understood as homogeneous and coherent is one of common sense's most established certitudes. In the media-induced imaginary it seems to loom over the world, dispensing beneficial effects or punishing those who stubbornly refuse it. This narration, in its unproblematic absoluteness, enables efforts and resources to rally in defence of the Shared Culture and bestows an identity against more or less malevolent strangers. These are only a few of its many functions: in fact it feeds an ideal tone in which pride and historical memory, ethical needs and true aspirations to a universal vision blend. However, it is also a dangerous mix, easily made to serve specific ends that master and exploit its symbolic power. It turns into a weapon wielded by hegemonic culture to deny the very existence of viable alternatives to its rule and to impose its *Weltanschauung* as the only possible one. What Weber called "a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of the world process" (1949: 81) crystallizes and loses its dynamic, instrumental nature to become the revelation of an eternal truth.

2.1. Individualist configuration and holistic cultures

The actual landscape of a culture is deeply different from the peaceful, uniform scenario that usually comes to mind. When you look at it without any uncritical acceptance of the obvious, you find that daily experience is made of conflicts and more or less emphasized differences. It is hard to think that such an array of dissonances could be referred to a single matrix. To pretend so is a trick, a survival strategy in an otherwise chaotic and featureless environment. This (self-)deception is proven wrong whenever you get to scratch the coat of homogeneity or stumble upon authors that put forward unconventional ideas and interpretations. It turns out then that different cultures share the same space/time, that people shape their lives according to divergent sets of values that come

from complex coevolutionary processes. History plays its part as well, so that especially in the West most of these visions of the world seem to have adapted to one another. They show peculiarities as well as common traits, which makes it difficult for an observer to trace clear limits and distinctions. They seem to be variations on a main theme. To understand how this came to pass, we must go back to one of the main turning-points of Western culture: the Enlightenment. It coincides with the appearance of a new set of ideas/values that Dumont calls “individualist configuration”. This set is radically different from those that came before it:

Without trying to be exhaustive, we shall consider the following as general traits or architectural elements: individualism (as opposed to holism); supremacy of relations with things (as opposed to supremacy of relations with men); absolute distinction between subject and object (as opposed to a merely relative, fluctuating one); segregation of values from facts and ideas (as opposed to a non-distinction or combination between them); organisation of knowledge on independent, homologous and homogeneous plans and disciplines (Dumont, 1991: 20).

If we stop and consider these characteristics, we cannot but notice that we are confronting dichotomies that characterize the critical debate on Simmel. First of all, Simmel opposed the division of knowledge into autonomous, non-communicating specializations. He not only stood against standard procedures, but broke every implicit academic code by showing a respect for the theories of specialists of other disciplines that was deemed an insult by his own proper colleagues and an invasion by those same others. The fact that it is still uncertain whether he is to be considered a sociologist or a philosopher, as he is rejected by both guilds, says a lot about the consequences of his research choices. Secondly, *Wechselwirkung* can be interpreted as a re-establishment of the central role of inter-human relations against the supremacy of money-organised connections with objects. These relations weave themselves in a way so tight and meaningful as to confer to the subject a remarkable importance. It is not the absolute relevance

preached by individualism: it is tempered by the influence of the life context in which the subject acts, structured by qualitative ties with other human beings and objects charged with emotional and aesthetic undertones that make them something else than consumeristic goods. Finally, any sharp distinction belonging to an *aut/aut* approach, such as subject/object or value/fact, simply does not belong with Simmel. He always tried not to coerce the elements of any opposition into a new synthesis where their unique significance would be lost, but to make evident their complementarity and separate dignity. In general, it can be observed that Dumont's words outline a confrontation between cultural systems where the "individualist configuration" shows most of the traits that Simmel identified in money-based Modernity. It might be thought we are facing yet another silent appropriation of Simmel's theories; it is, instead, a refreshing example of elective affinities, as Dumont points out:

Due to the extent and pregnancy of Simmel's arguments we just cited and their frequent convergence with our own, the reader could wonder why such arguments were not already made known during our research. The reason is simply that we did not know them (Dumont, 1991: 238, footnote 22).

Dumont's list of general traits could be criticized as conservative. He opposes traditional societies, hierarchic and hard on individual freedom, to modernity and its accent on individual independence: the modern subject is free from any kind of constriction, whether emotional, economic or legislative and yet Dumont seems to prefer the former formula. He could be one of a kind with Tönnies and his longing for *Gemeinschaft* or with Parsons and his systematic passion. It is an objection largely based on the myth and ideology of Progress, but notwithstanding this it could make sense if Dumont and his fellow critics of contemporary Western culture actually proposed to get back to the good old ways. Instead they merely suggest alternative lines of development able to salvage a few elements of reality that the predominant paradigm cannot fit into its

representations, thus setting in motion disaggregating effects on social tissue. As their critics cannot understand their premises, they interpret their positions on the basis of their own vision of the world, thus misunderstanding them.

On the contrary, Dumont deeply problematizes his position. He describes intercultural dynamics that go beyond the dichotomy individualism/holism. They rely on multi-level representations that allow a constant flux of exchange among different cultures, the existence of which has as yet gone unnoticed. Dumont observes that the set of modern values, for the first time ever, appears to be deterritorialized, that is to say independent from any specific cultural context, and claims to be universal, valid for any possible historical case with no consideration of its peculiarities. However, when it gets the upper hand, it does so against former cultural configurations that are all of a traditional, holistic type. It is not a process of predominance that takes place in a *res nullius*, in a political and social void close to anomy, but rather a clash and encounter process through which several original configurations come into existence. The ideological version of the winner affirms that the final issue of such a complicated series of events is the simple, total hegemony of modernity. According to Dumont, however, relations between modernity and former traditional cultures can be described through a vast range of solutions; whereas for a long time the modern set of values has taken over specific sectors of social life – mainly the economic and political spheres – it has left the old ways in charge of the rest:

My thesis will be that not only individualism is unable to totally replace holism and reign over the whole of society, but that, moreover, it could never have functioned at all if holism hadn't lent a hand in an unobserved and somewhat clandestine way (Dumont, 1991: 21).

The myth of Modernity's crushing victory over previous injustice and superstition has to be revised to some extent. There is no unidirectional influence between cultures, rather a new figure of

Wechselwirkung that conveys the sense of the extreme complexity of their relations. It can also explain apparent contradictions that so far have been viewed simply as residues bound to be supplanted by the new order. It might even be surmised that modern ideology's predominance can last as long as it does not try to colonise *every* sector of society where holistic forms still survive and compensate the imbalances that individualist configuration brings along. This is what Hobsbawm means when he writes:

The material advantages of a life in a world in which community and family declined were, and remain, undeniable. What few realized was how much of modern industrial society up to the mid-twentieth century had relied on a symbiosis between old community and family values and the new society, and therefore how dramatic the effects of their spectacularly rapid disintegration were likely to be (1995: 340).

When the hidden equilibrium between these components is finally jeopardized, that is to say when individualism's absolute primacy comes to pass, the human and social costs of its utopian visions become unbearable. A period of great instability opens up, such as the one that late modern industrial societies are living right now, where economism's predominance has almost made real the self-referential dream of ideology. Economism, however, has fallen into the same trap it devised to conquer holism's last strongholds. It has altogether lost consciousness of their secret necessity. It thinks itself up to the task of becoming a full-fledged ideology. In so doing it is undermining the foundations of its own success:

For the capitalist system, even when built on the operations of the market, had relied on a number of proclivities which had no intrinsic connection with that pursuit of the individual's advantage which, according to Adam Smith, fuelled its engine. It relied on "the habit of labour", which Adam Smith assumed to be one of the fundamental motives of human behaviour, on the willingness of human beings to postpone immediate gratification for a long period, i.e. to save and invest for future

rewards, on pride in achievement, on customs of mutual trust, and other attitudes which were not implicit in the rational maximisation of anyone's utilities (Hobsbawm, 1995: 342).

2.2. *The play of cultural variants*

Subterranean contacts between paradigms and the different weight of their influence lead to the shaping of national variants of the modern configuration. Each traditional culture, confronted with a new constellation of values, cannot accept its primacy passively. It has to devise strategies of resistance and adaptation that finally change it into something new, a new figure in the now shared universe of Modernity. In the throes of this process, it builds representations which help it maintain an inner sense and achieve a paradoxical synthesis between two orders of values, on one hand the holistic, autochthonous ones; on the other hand those coming from the individualistic configuration:

These new representations have two sides, one inward-bound, particularistic, self-justifying; the other outward-bound, universalistic, modernity-compliant. The key circumstance no one has noticed until now and my analysis brings to light is this: thanks to their universalistic side, these products of a particular culture's acculturation can become part of the predominant culture, the world culture of the time (Dumont, 1991: 29).

The so-called common culture hides within itself contradictory ideals and concepts that can be differently decoded depending on the symbolic reference frame chosen. The *Wechselwirkung* between global culture and local variants is complex: from time to time it re-enacts the initial opposition from which it started, but this happens in a spiral movement where circumstances change according to the acculturation process. Global culture, however, works on a dichotomic logic that does not allow it to see (or think of) the existence and necessity of these exchanges. They go on clandestinely, while there is no official contact and the representatives of traditional cultures are reduced to silence. This

whole dynamic results in an unperceived, and yet effective, distortion of communication among variants:

The fact is that national subcultures communicate with one another with less immediacy and easiness than it is normally expected [...]. Modern ideology entails a deep universalism that pushes every diversity it meets away from the cognitive dominion itself: one talks about “national characters” and every country has at its disposal many stereotypes regarding its neighbours. All in all national subcultures are much more opaque to one another than is usually believed (Dumont, 1983: 115-116).

This model accurately describes the “strange” behaviour Simmel’s critics adopted towards him: they made extensive use of his ideas, while publicly denying their validity (D’Andrea, 2009). Simmel is then better understood as a representative of the German variant of modern culture, one of the most lively and original thanks to the great value it credits to intellectual enterprise and to the peculiarities of its historical development. Germany has been part of European history since the beginning of the Christian era, partaking in its values and culture, until the end of the XVIII century, when something happened that Dumont singles out as a turning point:

Starting from 1770 and until 1830 an extraordinary intellectual and artistic expansion took place in Germany that can be considered as a mutation that sets German culture, especially its letters and philosophy, on a new basis. At the same time, this development marks the start of a process of estrangement that separates Germany from its Western neighbours, following which the evolution of ideas and values in Germany diverges from that of the West in a way that most observers have deemed fatal (1991: 34).

The crucial event that so influenced the relations between Germany and the rest of Europe is the advent of the Enlightenment and of the idea/value configuration it brings forth. What makes

German intellectuals reject the rising individualist ideology is its breaking up of the communitarian tie typical of their traditional culture, which they feel and live with special intensity. It is an essential, unavoidable tie that must be defended against a vision that reduces it to a mere historical relic; a tie on which Tönnies' famous *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* couple is based, which bears witness to the continuity of the concern to preserve the former's value. German thinkers, Herder in the lead, are opposed to the universal ideal that proclaims men to be equal through the simple fact of their humanity losing sight of the irreplaceable importance of cultural difference in equality.

Herder's thought shows a fine example of the cross-representations between cultures identified by Dumont. He was bound to rise against what he saw as the flattening reduction brought about by Enlightenment rationalism through a holistic perception of human nature that however does not result in sociocentrism and in the consequent leadership of his own culture; it is true, he opposes French culture, seen as corrupting, but nevertheless he raises to universalism and proclaims the equal dignity and value of every culture. He can take this bold theoretical step because German culture had already had the time to accept and interiorize another version of individualism, the one proposed by the Lutheran Reformation, not less disruptive, but paradoxically posing no threat to *Gemeinschaft*:

Reformation was individualism applied to what was then the more important dimension, the religious one, and that left untouched the socio-political level. In XVIII century Germany, Lutheran individualism developed and got democratized in what has been called "pietism", a purely inner individualism that left the feeling of belonging to the cultural community intact (Dumont, 1991: 34).

Luther's preaching affirmed an explicit negative judgment on all worldly matters, whereas it conferred on the subject a new freedom and responsibility where contact with the transcendental was

concerned. Thus Protestantism realizes, through these cornerstones, an unusual combination of individualist and holistic features. It confers spiritual autonomy to the subject without putting to the test his/her participation in the social community, highly prized in German culture. With his doctrine, however, Luther moves God farther and farther away from this world and leaves man alone in the “desert of metaphysical infinity” (Dumont, 1991: 102), taking away every form of solace to his existential anxieties. Man stands before a stern and distant God, who gives no instrument of salvation nor has ministers with whom to establish an emotional, human link. As time goes by, the faithful can bear this strain less and less and look for other ways to cope with it: without changing their allegiance, they shape its ideas in new forms with the aid of influences coming from other nations and cultures, which are taken in and mediated in previously unknown ways.

This is no place to delve in the deep processes from which Pietism finally issued, whose substantial influence on the making of German classic culture is today widely recognised (D’Andrea, 2005). It is enough to say that, through its action, the Lutheran legacy gets to affect subsequent cultural movements, first of all Romanticism. Moreover, it lends German culture its outstanding ability to build the cross-cultural representations Dumont discovered. Proof of their existence and importance in cultural processes can be found, for instance, in Simmel’s discussion of the two forms of individualism. In the essay *Die beiden Formen des Individualismus* (Simmel, 1995), Simmel describes the alternation and cohabitation, within Western culture, of two different conceptions of individualism, one that places man totally inside himself, free from every tie, but interprets this self as the universally human self, one and the same in everyone; the other that upholds the idea that human difference is a moral exigency and that everyone has to fulfil an ideal image of him/herself that is unique. Individualism of equality and individualism of inequality show clearly that the same term (representation, according to Dumont) can have contradictory

meanings and that its correct understanding is impossible without an analysis and comprehension of its context.

The fact of the existence of cross-representations has interesting consequences: it brings to light the circumstance that several cultural configurations are always striving to assert themselves within a given scenario; it offers a new standpoint from which to examine the ways in which an author is accepted or rejected, a standpoint from which Simmel's work and fortune are better understood; it opens uncharted territories to sociological investigation: individuation and description of working cross-representations could be an effective strategy to further the understanding of contemporary social life and to solve problems that affect international coexistence more and more deeply.

3. *Bildung* as the form of subjectivity

Simmel was not only “the brightest man in Europe” and an eccentric, original spirit, but also a representative of a cultural variant within Enlightenment Modernity, the latter being committed to a radical denegation of the very existence of the former or of any other conceivable alternative to its rule. Dumont has convincingly shown that the tale of homogeneous culture Modernity spun to ensure its dominion has many flaws, as a constant *Wechselwirkung* takes place between (temporary) winner and loser so that ideas and values migrate from one to the other, changing and adapting themselves to their new environment. This in turn undergoes deep modifications as a consequence of this “viral” injection. The idea that all such processes must lead to a static balance where everything stays more or less the same is at least naïve, as it fails to take into account reality's essential dynamism, beautifully described by Simmel in his last work:

[The] self-alienation of life, [the] confronting of itself in an autonomous form, can only appear as a contradiction when a rigid boundary is established between its within and its without, as though they were two self-centered substances, rather than

conceiving of it as a continuous movement whose unity at every point is divided into those opposing directions only by the spatial symbolism of our expression (Simmel, 2010: 16).

3.1. *The way to oneself*

New heuristic tools are required to address the world that this new sensibility reveals:

The contemporary historical dissolution of all that is substantial, absolute and eternal in the flux of things, in historical mutability, in a merely psychological reality seems to me to be then only preserved against an unceasing subjectivism and scepticism if one substitutes for every substantial secure value the living interaction of elements which ultimately underlies, in turn, the same dissolution into infinity. The central concepts of truth, value, objectivity etc., revealed themselves to me as changing effective phenomena, as the contents of a relativism which no longer implies the sceptical loosening of all determinations but rather means securing against this by means of a new concept of determination (Simmel, 1958: 9; translation in Simmel, 1978: 25).

Instead of a static approach, a dynamic relationship must be imagined where all elements give sense to one another without being necessary to the existence of the whole, which changes and yet stays the same, in a kind of spiralling dance that could even be thought of as the image of life.

If this holds true for “central concepts [like] truth, value, objectivity”, it should also work for other complex realities, such as subjectivity, which is not a Simmelian term, indeed, but today can be taken to describe one of his core concepts and major concerns. *Wechselwirkung* should be then interpreted not only as the source of a fundamental relational network, but as a creative movement through which subjective substance comes into being and unfurls itself. Like every other thing in the world, we wax and wane. We pulse, shine and fade away, according to an “individual law” (Simmel, 2001; 2010) that often goes unnoticed and, in some lucky

moments, becomes clear, almost obvious. There is no telling if or when someone starts on the way to himself, the «long and winding road» with which this essay began. Subjectivity is not a “natural” state or process, it does not simply happen, as everybody seems to think today; it is more like “a task that life gives to herself”, borrowing Banfi’s words (1961: 193). A task that everyone is free to accomplish or not, but cannot be delegated, nor carried out on one’s own. There must be an existential openness that comes from renouncing the illusion of self-autonomy and absolute freedom and accepting one’s dependence from the Other, two steps closely related that go against contemporary rhetoric discourse. It is what Morin calls an “open system”, an idea from which two main consequences stem:

The first is that the organisation laws of the living sphere are not based on balance, but on imbalance, recovered or compensated, on stabilized dynamism [...]. The second consequence, perhaps even more significant, is that system intelligibility must be found not only in the system itself, but in its relation with its environment and that this relation is not a simple dependence, it is constitutive of the system. *Reality is then in the relation as well as in the distinction between the open system and its environment* (Morin, 1990: 31-32).

As I already pointed out, such reasoning seems to find no place in today’s rhetoric on individualism and yet it echoes in several of its keywords. There are astounding formal similarities: according to Simmel, becoming a Subject with a capital S is the only way to make real one’s own individuality, which may sound more paradoxical than usual, seeing that it should come about by abdicating what is believed to be the winning strategy to achieve that goal; on the other hand, being unique and original is a crucial part of the current success model, to be attained through a never-ending acquisition of goods and skills and defining traits. Same words, different meanings. We could be confronted with another of Dumont’s cross-representations. To prove it, we should find some peculiar feature of the German variant that could present the two opposing

aspects we just sketched when considered from different standpoints. As a matter of fact, there is a perfect candidate for this role: *Bildung*. Dumont, in his beautiful book, describes it as nothing less than a “cultural institution” (1991: 9) which for more than a century oriented the life and behaviour of educated Germans. He is however at pains to translate its nuanced meaning in another language, so he chooses to keep the German term as it is. I will do the same, although I will try to convey at least some of its complexity.

3.2 *Bildung as a cross-representation*

Starting with its etymology, it is easy to find clues to a semantic abundance that needs not be coherent. *Bildung* contains *Bild*, which can be understood either as “image” or “act of shaping, giving form”. The general idea is that of shaping something according to a model image, so the whole thing is about a refining process, a deep transformation that should bring those who undergo it closer to some kind of perfection. In the beginning this perfection was represented by the *Vorbild*, the image of Christ: the individual soul was no more than its reflection and through a mystical process had to erase itself in order to become a pure tension towards the Divine. This went on for a long time, until – at the end of the XVIII century – a long sequence of subtle shifts brought about a dramatic change. It is the birth of the modern subject, still hazy, still unsure, but undeniably self-aware and not inclined to sacrifice itself on the altar of a deity on the wane. Even so, however, the personal route suggested by *Bildung* is rich in religious implications, as the spiritual dimension remains crucial in its development. The new protagonist of the social scene, at least in the German variant, takes great care of his/her inner reality and values it well beyond any utilitarian concern as he/she still perceives its transcendent aura, made of mystery, elevation and salvation. These undertones linger, while other exigencies and possibilities come to the fore. There is still an image and work to do to make it real, but after so much “negative” action the rising subject claims an active role in this

accomplishment, on both sides. The image has to do with him/her, with what he/she hopes or wants to become; he/she has to play a significant part in the process of realizing it. No more *Vorbild* then; instead, he/she will listen to a call, a *Beruf*, an inner voice that will show him/her the way to become more and more him/herself and this will happen through a constant interaction with his/her fellow travellers and the world in which he/she lives. As Wilhelm von Humboldt – who can be considered the theoretical systematiser of the *Bildung* tradition – writes to his wife:

That I am one with myself, that I am what I had the native endowment to become, that I see truth, that I feel harmonious beauty, that is your work, yours alone; and it is my work, mine alone, that you too are what you were meant to be, that you too see truth, and experience beauty and harmony (cited in Bruford, 1975: 10).

Bildung is a complex, multi-sided process of growth in which anyone works and is worked upon. It is at the same time subject and object and never has complete control of what happens. It is a way of dealing with humanity that allows for its multiple dimensions and contradictions while steadily urging it onwards. I would say that Simmel's words on life apply perfectly to the matter:

Life has two mutually complementary definitions: it is *more-life* and *more-than-life*. The “more” does not arrive by accident to augment a life already stable in its quantity; instead, life is the movement that, for each of its parts, even when these are comparatively pitiful, at every moment draws something into itself in order to transform it into its life (Simmel, 2010: 13).

Examining the evolution of the idea of *Bildung*, we witness a fundamental transition in Western history and culture, from individuality conceived as a disvalue to an increasing self-awareness that leads to the desire for autonomy and self-determination. Along these lines, subjectivity becomes a task that each has to deal with in his/her own way. German thinkers and intellectuals view it as the

ultimate goal of life, but they agree on its non-necessity. In other words, it is neither something that happens on its own, nor something that everyone has to undertake; it is based on an act of free will, so much so that I would say that in the end it is this striving, this desire to become more and more oneself that marks the true subject, an essential need that has ethic, moral, practical connotations as the double meaning of the term *Beruf* shows with perspicuity. Its main meaning is in fact “job, occupation”, while a more archaic one is “calling, vocation”. In an age of triumphant economy and industrialization, the best opportunity to fulfil oneself cannot but lie with one’s profession or economic activity: *Bildung* then lends to work the qualitative dimension that Hobsbawm mentioned while criticizing Smith and that can be found at HR organizational philosophy’s core, at least at the start. The numinous dimension, however, echoes in the notion of “calling”. It is a rare insight, the acknowledgement of man’s paradoxical duplicity, the same that Simmel focused on with his second apriori: individual law does not stem simply from reason and its enlightened side. Something else is calling, something that every great tradition named in its own way, trying to describe the indescribable, hinting. As Hillman notes (1996), we do not know what it is, but we know it is there and has an arcane quality and its existence makes us all “open systems” of another order, as we must give up the illusion of control and definition of ourselves, of a perfect understanding that we will never grasp.

I would rather say we *should* give up this illusion, as a keen observer may have guessed that *Bildung*’s cultural transition did not stop at this beautiful inner balance. Taking into account today’s main features, one cannot help but notice the unbridled individualism among them, along with another set of keywords that find their origin in the “bright side”: project as predetermination of the future, a certain way to assess the meaning of “career”, self-made-man rhetoric, originality and so on. Keywords that put emphasis on certain aspects of *Bildung*, while forgetting about others. No one seems to hear echoes any longer and what remains

of the complex movement that aimed at conciliating man's paradoxes is the stark affirmation of modern man's control over himself and everything else. *Bild* sounds like "build", that is to say that self-fulfilment is envisioned as something that can be – must be – carefully planned and realized, with no other limit than one's imagination or ambition. Triumph or failure, it depends only on one's skill, intelligence and single-mindedness. It is a very partial interpretation of the original issue, a way of reading it fraught with trouble. The main question, however, has to do with its being one of Modernity's cornerstones, while at the same time clearly belonging with the German variant. Dumont's theory can help us solve this enigma. Once the individualist configuration asserts itself within the different European traditional cultures, a process of acculturation kicks in which does not – as often imagined – lead to perfect assimilation, but forces pre-existent traditions to draw on their inner reserves of sense to resist being wiped out. The cultural landscape turns into a sort of patchwork, with provinces where the new influence gets the upper hand and others where things stay more or less the same. One of the main traits of individualist configuration is its need to divide and distinguish; such a dichotomic imagination is not up to understanding subtle, constant, clandestine interaction and tends to overlook things it does not count as significant. Holistic culture can then reshape itself, reformulating its main ideas and finding ways to make them palatable to the new *Weltanschauung*. Cross-representations are the impressive result of this subterranean activity: something that each variant decodes in its own way and that changes its meaning according to the cultural context in which it is set. *Bildung* becomes self-development: in Germany it is still interpreted more or less as before; modern culture finds it attractive and suitable to its own values and incorporates its main features without being aware of its complexity. It is a two-way process: elements of each cultural discourse filter inside the other, but proportions and strength of influence are variable, ever-changing. Both find themselves metamorphosed to an extent they cannot fathom.

So it turns out that (at least) two different discourses on subjectivity can be traced back to the idea of *Bildung*. They are almost mutually unintelligible. Simmel's concern with objective culture's hypertrophic production stems from his sensibility to inner life's fragility, from his awareness of the delicate balance that is needed to allow everyone to find his/her path in the world. As *Bildung* requires a constant exchange between the inside and the outside and time on the subject's part to elaborate on his/her experience to make it a living part of him/herself (*Erfahrung*, not *Erlebnis*), it has no foreseeable rhythm, no necessary progression. It is something that has to be willingly undertaken but cannot be forced, and too much interference risks making it go awry. These precautions, however, do not sit well with Modernity's stress on control and performance and disappear from the new, simplified version where organizational hints and consumeristic intimations also coalesce. Slowly at first and then at a headlong rush, the originality that was once an exterior reflection of a spiritual condition becomes the much simpler result of an endless combination of skills, accessories and merchandise, a rat race functional to economy's requirements, but unable to quench the thirst for transcendence that still haunts the runner (D'Andrea, 2005). It is an urgency that individualist configuration cannot perceive as such; it knows it is there, deems it illusory, albeit quite useful, and exploits it with no restraint, oblivious to repercussions. The result is a paradoxical set of expectations that twenty-first century men and women find almost impossible to be up to. Self-fulfilment should be rather easy to achieve, it says, once you have an ambitious plan, enthusiasm, positive thinking and energy. You should win even against all odds, if you try hard enough, and reap success and happiness.

I guess that is the keyword. Happiness. It is not a Simmelian term as well, even though it could be the result of a subject's constant refinement and growth, but today it can be interpreted as the clue that betrays the clandestine coexistence of disparate ideals, the echo that lingers. A state of bliss difficult to define, another figure for salvation, an uncertain and fleeting experience that everyone has *the*

right to pursue and live by: a need, in other words, that cannot but be transcendent and yet springs from a culture that mocks transcendence. It is this paradoxical and contradictory quality that reveals the contemporary quest for happiness as a side-effect of the hidden dimensions of subjectivity and religiosity that are entwined in the great project of self-development and make themselves felt in spite of all efforts to turn the whole adventure into something utterly and definitely materialistic. To avoid such interference, the very meaning of happiness had to be reinterpreted in terms of money and property, its fulfilment measured by quantitative parameters. For a time it worked, but in the end subjective perception and objective evaluation began to diverge and those expectations no longer made sense. In one of Nick Hornby's novels I found a passage that makes it perfectly clear:

The trouble with my generation is that we all think we're fucking geniuses. Making something isn't good enough for us, and neither is selling something, or teaching something, or even just doing something; we have to be something. It's our inalienable right, as citizens of the twenty-first century. If Christina Aguilera or Britney or some *American Idol* jerk can be something then why can't I? Where's mine, huh? OK, so my band, we put on the best live shows you could ever see in a bar, and we made two albums, which a lot of critics and not many real people liked. But having talent is never enough to make us happy, is it? I mean, it should be, because a talent is a gift and you should thank God for it, but I didn't. It just pissed me off because I wasn't being paid for it, and it didn't get me on the cover of *Rolling Stone* (Hornby, 2006: 23-24).

The right to be something is just the kind of misinterpretation that comes from mixing the incommensurable logics of *Bildung* in its variants. "Having talent is never enough to make us happy, is it?", Hornby's character asks himself with tragic insight. Talent is vocation, is *Beruf* and the *Bildung* tradition would tell him that listening to that call, for the sake of it, should be the only way to be

really happy. To be really someone. Not something. It may seem a slip of the tongue, but it is a telltale slip indeed.

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