

A Salem

## Simmel on the Autonomy of Social Forms

**Abstract.** *This article argues that Simmel's theories about modern society and culture provide important insights into the issue of the autonomy of the systems that we live under. It begins with a discussion of his ideas about a sense of unity between the self and the external world. It continues by examining the process by which such a sense alters as life fragments into the autonomous formal systems associated with modernity. This leads into an analysis of these forms and their internal functioning. The article concludes with an outline of how these considerations may be relevant to conscious efforts to bring about progressive social change. At issue is how far such critical practice can have an effect on its own terms and how far it is incorporated into a closed system incapable of affecting its environment.*

**Keywords:** *action and agency, autonomous systems, personal life, social change, social critique, social forms, socio-cultural theory.*

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** *veiksmas ir veiknumas, autonominės sistemos, asmens gyvenimas, socialiniai pokyčiai, socialinė kritika, socialinės formos, sociokultūrinė teorija.*

*Ever since human beings began referring to themselves as "I", having become an object above and against themselves, and ever since the contents of our soul have belonged to its centre by virtue of such a form, the ideal has grown out of this form that these things, which are connected in such a way to the centre, are also a self-enclosed unity, and therefore a self-sufficient totality.*

SIMMEL, 'THE CONCEPT  
AND TRAGEDY OF CULTURE'.<sup>1</sup>

### A Unified Experience

Simmel's theoretical writing on social forms is founded on a notion of an unconscious experience (*Erleben*) in which there is no dis-

tinction between the self and the world. In this intensified emotional state there is a complete continuity between what is inside and outside, where all impressions and perceptions have both physical and psychological aspects: 'the Ego and its objects are not yet distinguished; consciousness is filled with impressions and perceptions while the bearer of these contents has still not detached himself from them'.<sup>2</sup> In Simmel this emotional state is to some extent open to everyone regardless of context and time, but the most direct examples are children, prehistoric peoples and ancient civilisations where there is no conception of the autonomy

<sup>1</sup> Simmel 1997b; 67.

<sup>2</sup> Simmel 1978; 63.

of the subject.<sup>3</sup> Given the lack of distinction between subject and object, the subject does not confront the object as an external other, but instead is fused with it. There is no possibility for individual consciousness to go beyond the feelings aroused by the objects around it, or to see itself as a separate entity. The result of such a fusion of subject and object, we should note, is not only psychological but also epistemological: it leads to a loss of coherence in the subject, which is (certainly on a Kantian view) central to the exercise of rational thought.

This confusion of self and object is, however, short-lived, since the distinction between the two re-emerges when people are confronted by objects which are not open to manipulation in the here and now, and thus manifest themselves as being at a distance. In his book *The Philosophy of Money* Simmel makes the point that:

We desire objects only if they are not immediately given to us for our use and enjoyment; that is, to the extent that they resist our desire. The content of our desire becomes an object as soon as it is opposed to us, not only in the sense of being impervious to us, but also in terms of its distance as something not-yet-enjoyed, the subjective aspect of this condition being desire.<sup>4</sup>

In this situation, an awareness of the autonomy of the object is produced, and at the same time the self recognises its wants and thoughts as its own. As Simmel puts it:

Subject and object are born in the same act: logically, by presenting the ideal conceptual content first as a content of representation, and then as a content of objective reality; psychologically, when the still ego-less representation, in which person and object are undifferentiated, becomes divided and gives rise to a distance between the self and its object, through which each of them becomes a separate entity.<sup>5</sup>

This development extends well beyond economic considerations; for Simmel it is what lies behind all forms of cultural value:

The ability of a tangible symbol to awaken in us religious feelings; the moral challenge to revolutionize particular conditions of life or to leave them alone; the feeling of obligation not to remain indifferent to great events, but to respond to them; the right of what is perceived to be interpreted in an aesthetic context – all of these claims [...] cannot be traced either to the Ego or to the objects to which they refer.<sup>6</sup>

A consequence of this view is that the distinction between subject and object can be seen as something which takes in both, and which cannot be reduced to one or the other. As such, the distinction in all its forms becomes a problem worthy of attention in its own right:

It is rather a third term, an ideal concept which enters into the duality but is not exhausted by it. [...] Regarded from a naturalistic point of view such a claim may appear subjective, while from the subject's point of view it appears to be objective; in fact, it is a third category, which cannot

<sup>3</sup> Simmel 1978; 63–4, 71, 76.

<sup>4</sup> Simmel 1978; 66. There are many other similar passages on the creation of value in this text. Another example is: 'value does not originate from the unbroken unity of the moment of enjoyment, but from the separation between the subject and the content of enjoyment as an object that stands opposed to the subject as something desired and only to be attained by the conquest of distance, obstacles and difficulties' (p. 66).

<sup>5</sup> Simmel 1978; 65.

<sup>6</sup> Simmel 1978; 68.

be derived from either the subject or object, but which stands, so to speak, between us and the objects.<sup>7</sup>

The dissolution of *Erleben* into subjective and objective sides, then, leads both to an awareness of the resistance and autonomy of objects and to individuals recognising themselves as subjects with their own needs. As a consequence people begin to refer objects to their individual tastes: 'the circle of objects that can satisfy the subject's needs is diminished as he becomes more refined, and the objects desired are set in sharper contrast with all the others that might satisfy the need but are no longer acceptable'.<sup>8</sup> All qualities of objects are no longer treated uniformly, but instead are incorporated into experience through the individual preferences of the subjective personality. For Simmel this is the point at which different forms are drawn up in conscious experience. These forms may be seen as certain types of object relations corresponding to the demands of life: objects are experienced differently according to whatever form is being projected onto them at any moment. This leads to a differentiation and hierarchical organisation of objects, suggesting that they can be reduced to their formal qualities and recast as types: if for Simmel there is a particular experience which people have before some objects but not others, then this reflects the classification of objects by a

particular form. As we shall see, in this relation a match is established between the various forms and the objects they contain. Form and content are brought into a unity; forms become like autonomous objects while objects adopt the status of forms and their linked concepts.

### A World of Forms

The diversity and complexity of these forms should be made more specific. In Simmel people have vital functions that encompass not only biological processes but also affective and intellectual faculties. These functions have no primacy over one another and taken together lead to the formation of various forms of perspective, each as valid as the other.<sup>9</sup> Further, these functions and the forms that embody them change according to context as a result of combination and evolution. This permits the co-existence of a great variety of different forms, although the possible combinations are clearly also limited by time and place.<sup>10</sup> The essential point is that there is no sense here of unchanging human needs and their satisfaction. Instead real needs and their formal values are fluid; they change and are changed by the things around them.

We have seen that the process by which an object is given form in subjective experience distinguishes subject from object, and vice versa.

<sup>7</sup> Simmel 1978; 68.

<sup>8</sup> Simmel 1978; 70.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that cultural value for Simmel encompasses all forms of thought, including scientific investigation. See for example Simmel 1980; 97–126.

<sup>10</sup> As we shall see, an important feature of contemporary life is suggested here: an experience of ever-increasing complexity and uncertainty. This is a central theme of Simmel's essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life'; see Simmel 1964; 409–24.

The distinction is however qualified by the way that the very representation of objects within formal structures ignores any qualities within them that are judged to be irrelevant: the nature of the objects represented is transformed, and alters for every form of perspective from which they are viewed.<sup>11</sup> Simmel's remarks about the colour blue are a well-known example of this process of assimilation and transformation: 'Simmel considers the color blue as an example of a phenomenon that may be constituted by a variety of forms. In optics, blue is a wavelength. In lyric poetry, it symbolizes a mood of depression. In religious symbolism, it represents the kingdom of heaven'.<sup>12</sup> As in Kant, mental structure is not decided by the structure of matter. Rather mental structures decide what is looked for and then discovered in the outer world. Yet Simmel departs from Kantian ideas in many respects. In Kant rationality plays a pre-eminent role as a tool of objective knowledge. A central aspect of Simmel's work, by contrast, is its removal of the priority of any one mental faculty over any other. For Simmel rationality is simply one form among many, none of which are given any priority, and all of which are valid tools for gaining knowledge.

That all phenomena in subjective experience are reduced to types and can only be seen as groupings of representations does not mean that Simmel denies the existence of objects as things in themselves, but that for him there is

no way of making contact with content as such. Again, this view shares certain features with Kant, though the two differ in terms of what lies behind the visible. For Kant the presence of an essential reality beneath surface phenomena is not rejected as such but must be left unanalysed. Here, due to the impossibility of isolating it for observation, essence is excluded as a subject of consideration or conjecture. Simmel argues against this position, claiming that the contents of thought manifest themselves to consciousness in all their completeness, and not 'on credit from a more independent existence'.<sup>13</sup> For him then the formal value of objects is both pure appearance and pure essence:

we see in the object not merely individuality, but something transindividual that is shared by an infinite number of individual things dispersed through space and time, hidden in differentiated shapes as their self-identical and unitary ideal form, and unlike a logical generality created by posterior abstraction, visible immediately to the eye that looks for it.<sup>14</sup>

The suggestion is that although form reduces the thing observed to a typology and describes it in its own terms, this still brings out something essential about the thing itself.

This is not to say that form permits the specificities of objects to be fully expressed: 'we can probably never grasp this material in pure form because it will always present itself as a pre-formed component'.<sup>15</sup> But it does allow Simmel

<sup>11</sup> This is not exactly to say that there is no reality behind representation: rather for Simmel there is little difference between represented and real objects in psychological terms.

<sup>12</sup> Oakes in Simmel 1980; 15–6.

<sup>13</sup> Simmel quoted in Weingartner 1962; 28.

<sup>14</sup> Simmel 1986; 79.

<sup>15</sup> Simmel 1997a; 139.

to open the essence of reality to interpretations from the point of view of each form: 'We can have precisely the same man as the object of knowledge and of artistic creation, precisely the same event as a moment of our inner destiny and as proof of divine intervention, precisely the same object purely as a sense impression and as an exemplification of the metaphysical construction of existence'.<sup>16</sup> If essentially the same material can be found across the full range of forms, then all human knowledge relates certain truths about the external world but, since forms subsume objects to a function beyond their own content, they can only produce a knowledge which is incomplete, and which can never be completed. A logical corollary of this schema is that any one description of reality is just as good as any other, making for a broad relativism that stands opposed to classical ideas about the objectivity of knowledge.<sup>17</sup> We will come back to this issue, but finally the implication is that the reality of a description can be seen as a matter of convention or at best as a cultural choice: the status of essential reality rests on people's collective opinions about the accuracy or truth of such descriptions.

It can be asked how much separates Simmel's view of mind and reality sharing common structures from its antithesis, where such structures are actually a creation of the

mind itself. While Simmel sees the contents of thought as containing ideal essences within themselves (even if they can only be grasped subjectively), he also goes beyond essentialist views and outlines a structuralist agenda for the analysis of mental operation:

The essential accomplishment of the mind may be said to be its transformation of the multiplicity of the elements of the world into a series of unities. In the mind, things separated in space and time converge in the unity of a picture, a concept, a sentence. The closer the interrelation of the parts of a complex, and the livelier their interaction (which transforms their separateness into mutual dependence), the more the whole appears to be pervaded by mind.<sup>18</sup>

There is a clear sense here that contents must be placed in a unitary structure before they can create meaning. As with the terms of language, diverse objects are abstracted from reality and given a general, typical appearance, to be seen rather as contrasting elements on a single plane, where meaning is created not by their inherent significance but by their interrelation. Indeed for Simmel, 'The categories under which specific phenomena are subsumed in order to incorporate them into knowledge, its norms and relationships, are marked off from each other and often gain their meaning only from this contrast'.<sup>19</sup> In this way a signifying system can be established, one founded on the

<sup>16</sup> Simmel in Wolff 1959: 288. A similar claim is made in his essay on religion: 'All of these worlds are constructed from the same material, the basic components of the world, which become artistic, practical, or theoretical depending on the synthesis imposed on them by the mind'. Simmel 1997a; 139.

<sup>17</sup> See Simmel 1986; 20.

<sup>18</sup> Simmel in Wolff 1959; 276. Clearly these views have much in common with the ideas of Saussure.

<sup>19</sup> Simmel 1978; 448.

manner in which differentiated, standardised elements are combined. The different meanings that emerge from the system are the result of combining recognisable signs, as though every element in the system were an interchangeable part. Simmel himself supports this view: 'Every philosophical system, every religion, every moment of our heightened emotional experience searches for symbols which are appropriate for their expression. If we pursue this possibility of aesthetic appreciation to its final point, we find that there are no essential differences among things'.<sup>20</sup> Here an insubstantial exchange of tokens is posited in signifying systems that give objects no inherent qualities whatsoever. Yet if signification operates by ordering pre-defined elements, and if meaning is a consequence of arbitrary difference, then signs become autonomous and self-referential and in fact relate only to other signs. As a consequence, mind and the creations of the mind can be seen as an independent domain with no connection to reality. At this point we touch on aspects of Simmel's work examined in more detail in later sections dealing with the issue of what occurs after forms like these become conventions in themselves, but it becomes clearer that an order is imposed by the mind on impressions, shifting away from the phenomena observed into a domain of generalised principles:

impressions must be given forms and connections which are not inherent in them but which are imposed on them precisely by the knowing

mind as such. Only thus does the chaos or the mere spatial and temporal succession of sense impressions become what we call nature: a meaningful, intelligible coherence in which the diversity of things appears as a principled unity, knitted together by laws.<sup>21</sup>

While all impressions and thus objects are functionally identified and divided among many forms, this does not undermine the unity of the subject. For Simmel these forms are partially independent of one another but are nonetheless all parts of a single coherent entity: he is not proposing any conception of irreconcilable parts of a whole. While he cautions that the various forms may manifest themselves as distinct units operating independently of one another, it is nonetheless the 'entire man' who 'thinks, feels, desires'. Each form can only operate effectively within a whole of which it is a part, even though 'one element of a totality may well be determined by that totality as a unity, without it being possible to discover the influence of any single different element on the first'.<sup>22</sup> There is an insistence here on the unity of the subject beyond a multiplicity of heterogeneous forms, even if contact with it can only be made instinctively. This view should be opposed to theories (associated with Kant) that view experience in terms of privileged intellectual faculties: subjectivity for Simmel encompasses the interaction not only of mental categories but of emotional and indeed physiological functions operating together.<sup>23</sup> The differentiation of forms within the

<sup>20</sup> Simmel 1968; 69.

<sup>21</sup> Simmel in Wolff 1959; 291.

<sup>22</sup> Simmel cited in Weingartner 1962; 46.

<sup>23</sup> Similarly Schopenhauer wrote that: 'consciousness depends first of all on the intellect, but the intellect depends on a physiological process [...]. An individual consciousness, that is to say a



self and the use of objects (whether represented or real) in conformance with formal values can then be seen to reinforce self-awareness, for 'as the objects created by him increase in number and kind, the experiencing subject becomes more aware of itself as subject and more fully developed in the functions appropriate to the different types of objects'.<sup>24</sup> We shall see, however, that it makes just as much sense to say that the subject is not in control of this process but is rather a function of it. Rather than being developed by formal discipline, people may become ever more like closed, regulated systems functioning according to their own laws.<sup>25</sup>

### The Autonomy of Forms

As already noted, the state of *Erleben* for Simmel is linked to children, 'primitives' and the unconscious, while distance from the object is generally described as a modern phenomenon. Yet the importance of such generalisations should not be over-emphasised. In Simmel the separation of experience from life is less a product of recent history than a natural and unchanging condition that affects everyone, rupturing, and restoring, again and again, the state of *Erleben*. Nevertheless, we should now explore the effect that such a process has on the situation of the individual with regard to the development of modern life.

When life is still in what Simmel calls a teleological stage of its development, the forms that are associated with experience are primarily instrumental tools for meeting mental and physical needs through the differentiation of goals and therefore of objects.<sup>26</sup> Simmel describes the forms referred to here as a tool of life and nothing more: 'The categories, by which the conscious picture of things is produced, are mere tools within the vital chain'.<sup>27</sup> In this condition, different forms in experience can be thought of as open structures. It is not that they are formless but rather that they are only partially identifiable. Crossovers and parallels break down the distinctions between them, while their very operation is limited by the extent of their success in meeting needs. Such forms, while capable of informing meaning and intention, are what we make them. In their provisional nature, their openness and interpenetration, and their functionality, they are a means to an end, but nothing more.

This is not to say that when their task is finished all traces of experiential forms governed by practical concerns are erased. There may be a circulation of forms long outlasting their creators insofar as they made their objectives known to others, perhaps through personal contact, or by a process of reproduction. With their persistence through history these forms lose at least some

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consciousness of any kind, cannot be thought of apart from a corporeal being, because cognition, which is the precondition of all consciousness, is necessarily a function of the brain – properly speaking because brain is the objective form of the intellect'. Schopenhauer 1970; 70.

<sup>24</sup> See Weingartner 1962; 46.

<sup>25</sup> See for instance Simmel 1997b; 235. See also Simmel in Lawrence 1976; 253, 253–4.

<sup>26</sup> See for example Simmel, 1978; 70.

<sup>27</sup> Simmel cited by Weingartner 1962; 47.

of their status as contingent, temporal things geared to the needs of the individual, to become more like self-contained entities, objective and timeless, which bring a type of uniformity to otherwise diverse individuals. It is with reference to this background that Simmel's comments about the form of language should be viewed:

It is true that language rhymes and reasons for us; it collects the fragmentary impulses of our own essence and leads them to a perfection which we would not have reached on our own. Nevertheless, there is no necessity in the parallel between objective and subjective developments. Indeed, we sometimes even perceive language as a strange natural force which deflects and mutilates not only our expressions, but also our most intimate intentions.<sup>28</sup>

In this passage there is a clear sense that ordered experiential structures have surpassed their makers' intentions, outgrowing their beginnings and their merely practical applications to display their own autonomous development. As Simmel puts it: 'At the moment of their establishment they are, perhaps, well-matched to life, but as life continues its evolution, they tend to become remote from life, indeed hostile to it'.<sup>29</sup> Apparently, structures of experience, just by being there, proceed from usefulness towards an autonomous effect detached from any link with individuals.

If this is not necessarily the case, however, it is because for as long as life is still in a teleological stage, such forms, while capable of circulat-

ing across different times and places regardless of intentionality, may still have no importance other than as an object of use for everyone concerned. Something radically different takes place, however, when life undergoes what Simmel calls a 'turning' (*Drehung*) in its development. The basis for this transformation is the ability of people to break with actions taken to meet the dictates of their own lives: instead they may develop a dedication to practices that are not determined by utility or function. In this way human activity is turned from an instrumental matter into an autonomous practice with no obvious beneficiary. Such developments for Simmel are linked to freedom: 'freedom signifies precisely the potentiality for breaking through teleology'.<sup>30</sup>

This idea of non-instrumental activity should be contrasted with the more common view of actions practiced entirely for their own sake. Activities valued not for their utility but for their uniqueness may end up reinforcing their association with life insofar as they are taken to be enjoyable. Instead an external and autonomous substance is required to complete the turn towards non-purposive activity in Simmel's terms. This is where the development of forms comes in:

Once the religious mood has created its structure, the god, wholly out of itself, it is "religion"; once the aesthetic form has made its content something secondary, by which it lives a life

<sup>28</sup> Simmel 1968; 39.

<sup>29</sup> Simmel in Lawrence 1976; 223 (this sentence is omitted in Etkorn's translation). In relation to the disparity between real needs and fixed forms, Simmel notes that laws, which might once have been progressive, may become repressive at other times. See Simmel 1964b; 385, 386.

<sup>30</sup> Simmel cited in Weingartner 1962; 51. For a discussion of Simmel's notion of freedom, see Poggi 1993; 153–6.



of its own that listens only to itself, it becomes “art”; once moral duty is fulfilled simply because it is duty, no matter how changing the contents by means of which it is fulfilled and which previously in turn determined the will, it becomes “morality”.<sup>31</sup>

What was once simply an instrument of life becomes a value in itself, one not grounded in the inner fulfilment of the individual. This process may be linked to the development of modern society and culture in the fullest sense.

Further, the transcendent qualities of these forms are in turn projected back onto the individual. For example, as an object in its own right far from the concerns of life, the qualities of the form of art are projected onto the artistic temperament: the ‘artist’ is a specialist in artistic knowledge and uses a specialist language, a set of particular instruments and a particular kind of judgement. For Simmel this change is linked to homogenisation: ‘the exterior worlds grasp the “I” to draw it into them. They aim to break up the centralization of cultural contents around the “I” and reconstitute them according to *their* demands’.<sup>32</sup> The irony is that life invents these structures simply as a means of continuing itself

and then comes to devote itself to the service of their principles. In this way their surroundings remake those who inhabit them, while seemingly reflecting their own temperament. On one level, the development of what Simmel calls ‘free’ activity is a historical matter occurring at different times for different forms. Each form, at some indeterminate point in history, is simply ‘ready’ to become the object of human action. Yet there is plainly also a sense in which this transformation (if applied to art for example) has a class dimension, permitting only a minority to participate in it.<sup>33</sup> While many people do not have the opportunity to devote themselves to certain autonomous practices, those who do are defined by their task: ‘In general we see in order to live. The artist lives in order to see [...]. At first men know in order to live; but then there are men who live in order to know’.<sup>34</sup> There is clearly no sense of *Erleben* here:

With the turning toward free action, the process of differentiation of subject and object is in principle completed. The individual sees himself as a subject, surrounded by realms of formed contents which have in the full sense become objects of their activity. His actions are not

<sup>31</sup> Simmel in Wolff 1959; 257.

<sup>32</sup> Simmel 1968; 40, italics in original.

<sup>33</sup> This of course is a central theme within Marxist theory. For Marx and Engels the division of labour goes back to the emergence of intellectual figures (such as priests or scribes) in ancient civilisations, for ‘From this moment onwards consciousness *can* really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it *really* represents something without representing something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of “pure” theory, theology, philosophy, morality’. Marx and Engels 1976; 45, 44, italics in original. This process of ever-increasing specialisation is juxtaposed with a primeval state of unity between subject and object in which ‘consciousness takes the place of instinct’ or ‘instinct is a conscious one’ (p. 44). Such a state is lost as ‘consciousness receives its further development and extension through increased productivity, the increase of needs, and, what is fundamental to both of these [...] the increase in population’ (pp. 44–5).

<sup>34</sup> Simmel cited in Weingartner 1962; 55.

merely directed toward these objects, but they are performed for the sake of these objects.<sup>35</sup>

Those who attend to a comparatively isolated field of activity bounded by a tendency to seek out its own ideals and to concentrate on them alone begin to act in the expected way, helping to reinforce its autonomy:

A work of art is supposed to be perfect in terms of artistic norms. They do not ask for anything else but themselves, and would give or deny value to the work even if there were nothing else in the world but this particular work. The result of research should be truth and absolutely nothing further. Religion exhausts its meaning with the salvation which it brings to the soul. The economic product wishes to be economically perfect, and does not recognize for itself any other than the economic scale of values. All these sequences operate within the confines of purely internal laws.<sup>36</sup>

As a consequence of their specialised tasks, people are seen not so much as individuals than as examples of types.<sup>37</sup> Ironically, life once again becomes entirely goal-oriented, not so that individual needs can be met, but to serve the requirements of various differentiated zones of social activity.

If such ordered structures are to continue to function and endure through history, then they must integrate ever more material into themselves. On the one hand this process is supposed to produce new forms of knowledge.

Rudolph Weingartner gives a few examples: 'The scientist makes contributions to his field by integrating new contents into the system of science. The historian is concerned with ordering some part of the realm of contents by means of the forms of historical writing. Each, according to his vocation, enlarges the treasure of objects of culture'.<sup>38</sup> Yet this is to downplay the classificatory power of form in general. The filtering of material through formal systems of representation, as already noted, tends to produce homogeneity: 'the individual object loses the significance which it possesses precisely as an individual and in contrast with everything else'.<sup>39</sup> For example, in marrying representation with content, art arranges otherwise diverse phenomena into an order that is presented within the frame of an artwork. For Simmel, 'The real object interacts with everything that surges past or hovers around it, but the content of a work of art cuts off these threads, fusing only its own elements into a self-sufficient unity'.<sup>40</sup> So representations of objects are ranged on a pre-existing scale of value, while their specific features are ignored, and the result has the appearance of a meaningful narrative. Reality comes to participate in a continuum in which all things are compliant to the wishes of the artist.<sup>41</sup>

For Simmel, some forms of experience have the power to structure the entirety of external

<sup>35</sup> Weingartner 1962; 55.

<sup>36</sup> Simmel 1968; 36.

<sup>37</sup> There is a possible exception, for Simmel, as in when form itself is taken as the subject matter. See Simmel in Wolff 1959; 283.

<sup>38</sup> Weingartner in Wolff 1959; 50.

<sup>39</sup> Simmel 1978; 70.

<sup>40</sup> Simmel in Wolff 1959; 267.

<sup>41</sup> For a discussion of this point in relation to photography, see Stallabrass 1996; 23.

data. Here the most diverse objects, stripped of their superfluous qualities, are placed and ordered on a single scale of value, so that the more objects are added to it, the more there appears to be proof for a coherent world-view: 'Art, according to its principle, can claim to shape the entire sphere of existence; and, similarly, no segment of the world can escape knowledge. One can ask about the place of anything in a scale of values [...]'.<sup>42</sup> Simmel writes of how 'great' forms can bring the complexities of the whole world into focus: 'Science and art, religion and the inner assimilation of the world, sense perception and the coherence of things according to a given principle and value – these, and perhaps still others, are the great forms through which, as it were, each particular part of the content of the world can, or should, pass'.<sup>43</sup> These forms are clearly an effective way to bring clarity and order to the world. Yet their descriptive power has little to do with the particularities of the phenomena they contain. Rather the significance of phenomena governed by the same scale of value, in which each element only has meaning in relation to each other, is actually created by an apprehension of the order in which they participate: 'the most general rules forming the multiplicity of phenomena into a uniform nature [...] do not stem from phenomena but from the mind's own ability to connect, to unify. [...] The understanding prescribes for nature the laws of nature'.<sup>44</sup> Objects in forms only have meaning

according to a certain kind of taxonomic order. In this context they are little more than empty ciphers, their significance dwelling in their arrangement and their relation to one another. If 'great' forms can set all things on a single scale of value, then this is to reduce the entire world to an arrangement of intrinsically empty tokens, which collectively comprise a signifying structure. Although each unit in the structure is meaningless when viewed in isolation from the others, the structure's relational functioning as a whole is nevertheless taken to be meaningful: 'man's form-giving power, in contrast to the contingent and confused character of mere nature [...] leads beyond a mere acceptance of the meaninglessness of things to a will to transform them symmetrically'.<sup>45</sup> It can be said that such forms represent an effort to construct a realm in which all things strictly conform to the concepts used to describe them. Taken as closed systems of knowledge containing within themselves representations of all objects, they may give the impression of a complete and consistent understanding of the world, by transforming it in accord with their own order and symmetry of parts. Of this Simmel writes:

The closed system aims to unite all truths, in their most general concepts, into a structure of higher and lower elements which extend from a basic theme, arranged symmetrically and balanced in all directions. The decisive point is that it sees the proof of its substantive validity in its architectural and aesthetic completion, in the successful closure and solidity of its edifice. This

<sup>42</sup> Simmel in Wolff 1959; 289.

<sup>43</sup> Simmel in Wolff 1959; 288.

<sup>44</sup> Simmel in Wolff 1959; 291, 290.

<sup>45</sup> Simmel 1968; 71.

represents the most extreme culmination of the formal principle: perfection of form as the ultimate criterion of truth.<sup>46</sup>

The co-existence of a wide variety of formal systems, in which a meaning produced only by structure extends to cover all phenomena, works against the use of any one system as a form of universal truth. These systems, each with its own perspective on the world, produce knowledge of a completely different order to one another. In each case a unified, ordered and all-encompassing world is suggested which may be seen as a discourse set apart from all others. In general the realm of art has its own values and morés and is to be distinguished from science. Similarly, as Guy Oakes points out: 'A religious commitment cannot be understood by employing the criteria that are appropriate to an experiment in chemistry. A piece of music cannot be judged according to the standards appropriate to a geometrical proof. Nor can an historical interpretation be appraised by employing the criteria for truth on which physical theories are grounded'.<sup>47</sup> In fact, Simmel suggests, different areas of the same form, while still participating in the order of a yet more general structure, may themselves be governed by different criteria. He notes that a historiography aimed at motivating political action can be contrasted with one that collates information about the general life of a period: 'the criteria for truth in these two

branches of history – and not merely their special, technical criteria – are completely different. The conditions under which a proposition is true in these two disciplines are simply not the same'.<sup>48</sup> Simmel's comment about the status of knowledge in relation to different forms (or areas of a form) is relevant here: 'truth is a certain relationship to its object'.<sup>49</sup> For him the various forms of perspective produce very different types of knowledge, yet all are independent of each other and there is no hierarchical relationship between them.<sup>50</sup>

The optical representation of a house at a distance of thirty meters is completely ordered, uniform, and comprehensible. However, if one were suddenly to introduce into this picture a segment of the representation that would be received if the same house were seen from a distance of three meters (which in itself is just as correct and meaningful), then the resulting representation would be quite incomprehensible and contradictory.<sup>51</sup>

Clearly the argument here is directed towards contradiction and relativism with consequences both for world-views and narrower perspectives. Different forms and their parts yield different but just as plausible interpretations of external objects: for Simmel human knowledge of all kinds is entirely relative.

### Contingent Forms

So far, we have looked at the separation of a variety of formal systems and their independent

<sup>46</sup> Simmel 1968; 21.

<sup>47</sup> Oakes in Simmel 1980; 20.

<sup>48</sup> Simmel 1977; 83.

<sup>49</sup> Simmel 1977; 83.

<sup>50</sup> Simmel's views here are very close to those of Niklas Luhmann. See for example Luhmann's 1995 book *Social Systems*.

<sup>51</sup> Simmel in Wolff 1959; 304–5.

operation. There would seem to be, however, two ways in which such forms are all linked to one another. First, while they might aspire to autonomy from their environment, the attempt to create something completely distinct is unviable for to be successful, any unity of form and meaning must have some link to an outer world. As Simmel puts it: 'What is common to value and reality stands above them: namely the contents, which Plato called "ideas", the qualitative, that which can be signified and expressed in our concepts of reality and value, and which can enter into either one or the other series'.<sup>52</sup> So the meanings which emerge from arrangements of objects in various closed systems are in part based on their very existence: if the effect of combinations of objects in forms is to signify then this is partly due to the fact that they are there. It might be thought that this assertion of the heterogeneity of objects (their being-in-themselves) threatens the autonomy of form. Yet we should not overplay this possibility. In general we have seen that structure has priority over content, that form removes all intrinsic characteristics from objects themselves in conformance with the operation of a system of value where discrete elements are linked functionally to construct an autonomous significance.

Secondly, there is the integrated subject through which all forms reproduce themselves. Simmel writes that: 'The worlds of content are strangers to each other as long as they are understood only in terms of their forms or ideas, but life experience shows that they are

interrelated as end and means to one another, and that they coalesce into a unity of life'.<sup>53</sup> It may be that in one sense objects in forms sit on a single scale in which their particular meaning in the here and now is lost, while in another they are mapped onto the temporal continuity of the entire life of a person, who at any one time may bring a wider range of experience or another level of reference to the reading of an object. There is a political aspect to this stress on an altered attitude to objects brought about by a change of consciousness. Where objects are seen not as the component parts of a uniform system but simply for what they are, then form loses its autonomy and may appear as a mere simulacrum of order and even as alien. But again it is unclear how such a change of consciousness could be seen to imply a thoroughgoing rupture of pre-established formal systems. Simmel himself suggests that the results of this shift of view are highly subjective, extremely transient and require some special skill or education: 'The system breaks down as soon as man has *intellectually* mastered the proper meaning of the object and need no longer derive it only from its relations with others; at this point, therefore, there is a weakening of the aesthetic will to symmetry, with which the elements were previously arranged'.<sup>54</sup>

While the internal functioning of various closed systems suggests a totalising vision of the world in which all things have their place, this is qualified and uncertain. As Guy Oakes notes, 'No conceptual scheme can provide a complete

<sup>52</sup> Simmel 1978; 62.

<sup>53</sup> Simmel 1986; 75.

<sup>54</sup> Simmel 1968; 72, my italics.



classification of reality. The language of every form is incomplete'.<sup>55</sup> Forms strive towards ubiquity, but their inability to accomplish this is very much to do with their relationship to history. Despite their ambition to control their environment, they are greatly transfigured by time and context. Simmel describes how forms always find themselves at the mercy of their surroundings:

the ideal right of [...] forms to construct an entire world out of the collectivity of contents is realized only with the inevitable imperfection of a historical structure. Only in this way can these forms live: with all the contingencies, adaptations, lags, or deviations of development and individual one-sidedness – in short, with all of the peculiarities and deficiencies exhibited by a historical reality that is bound to the conditions of an epoch – in contrast to the idea and principle of a form.<sup>56</sup>

This is the case for religion with its imperfect modes of recasting reality in a comprehensible form:

we have no absolute religion which permits us to give religious meaning to each thing – the lowest and most contingent as well as the highest – to connect each thing with all things in the unity of the fundamental religious theme. We have

instead only historical religions, each of which permeates only a certain part of the contents of the world, the soul and destiny, while another part remains outside and eludes this forming activity of religion.<sup>57</sup>

Similar results are found in art: 'We have no absolute art, but only the arts, artistic means, and styles of the culture of a period. And since these are different today from what they were yesterday and from what they will be tomorrow, they suffice to give artistic shape only to certain contents; other contents that cannot be accommodated by the artistic form available can in principle become the content of art'.<sup>58</sup> The point is simply that forms cannot encompass the full range of phenomena if they are to prevail as systems at any particular moment.<sup>59</sup>

It may be that there are things that forms cannot appropriate at any one time but this barely affects their strongest characteristics which ultimately produce homogeneity. Even radical departures from norms may appear as parts of a uniform system with its own generally effective internal workings. For Simmel this is even so of Expressionist painting which may otherwise be read as a rejection of whole categories of

<sup>55</sup> Oakes in Simmel 1980: 17. Tenbruck makes a similar point: 'only "distorted" forms can be discovered in reality'. Tenbruck in Wolff 1959; 79.

<sup>56</sup> Simmel in Wolff: 1959; 289. A similar claim is made in Simmel's writing on religion: 'every [...] form of existence, as it manifests itself at a historical point in the infinite development of our species, can acquire [...] material only in fragmentary form and in constantly changing conditions'. Simmel 1997a; 139.

<sup>57</sup> Simmel in Wolff 1959; 289.

<sup>58</sup> Simmel in Wolff 1959; 289.

<sup>59</sup> This is close to Hegel who thought that if something were not held back from the homogeneity of a system then it would not alter over the years. This aspect of Hegel's work is discussed by Di Giovanni in his essay 'The Category of Contingency in the Hegelian Logic', in Stepelevich 1993; 41–59. Di Giovanni concludes that 'there is no situation too irrational to serve as the basis for a new order, and no degree of order that does not generate its own opposite' (p. 56).



art-world reference in favour of a stress on artistic individuality: 'the work which reflects it' remains 'a kind of blend of artistic individuality and a given alien entity'. He continues that:

just as this non-subjective element is rejected, so likewise is the formal procedure, in the narrower sense, which is available to the artist from some external source: tradition, technique, a model or an established principle. All these are obstructions to life, whose urge is to pour out spontaneously and creatively. If it were to accommodate itself to such forms it would survive in the work only in a distorted, ossified and spurious guise.<sup>60</sup>

While from the viewpoint of individual artists such interventions are a purely voluntary matter, and may have a radical content, from the perspective of the art world as a system, the apparently radical action of artists as individuals is nonetheless shown to be significant only when they are placed alongside all other artists.

### Opposed Forces

Two closely related and at the same time fundamentally opposed conceptions of life are present in Simmel's work. In the first, he argues, life is more-of-itself to the extent that: 'So long as life is present at all, it gives birth to living things [...]. This is no function which it exercises among others, but insofar as it does this it is life'.<sup>61</sup> As living beings with mental and physical needs people must produce something new so as to reproduce themselves, while

discarding the products of their activity when they have ceased to be of use. As we have seen, this discarded material is at first a by-product of practical considerations, but in being turned into something that has value in itself, it loses its vestigial nature and becomes a self-enclosed system very much separated from life, a 'shell from which life has been emptied'.<sup>62</sup> For Simmel this removal of parts from a whole is the basis for the modern age which fills the social and cultural environment with a multitude of differentiated forms beyond individual management or control: 'Once certain themes of law, of art, of morals have been created [...] we cannot control the directions in which they will develop. Although we generate them, they must follow the guidelines of their own inner necessity, which is no more concerned with our individuality than are physical forces and their laws'.<sup>63</sup> These systems owe their existence to life, but their origin recedes as they evolve in response to technical development, their own inner logic, and a uniformity of behaviour among their participants.<sup>64</sup> Given this, we can understand Simmel writing of the dual aspect of life not just as more-of-itself, but as more-than-itself: 'life has two mutually complementary definitions. It is *more-life*, and it is *more-than-life*'.<sup>65</sup>

Simmel's interest in the subjective dimension of time should be viewed against the backdrop of these concerns. Here finally a limit

<sup>60</sup> Simmel in Lawrence 1976; 229; for a slightly distinct translation see Simmel 1968; 16.

<sup>61</sup> Simmel 1971; 369.

<sup>62</sup> Simmel 1997b; 104.

<sup>63</sup> Simmel 1968; 39.

<sup>64</sup> See Simmel in Lawrence 1976; 248, 249.

<sup>65</sup> Simmel 1971; 368, italics in original.

is drawn between the human and the formal, lest the identification of people with forms is made complete. Compared to the reversible and repeatable time of forms, lived time partakes of incessant and unrepeatable development: in the 'subjectively *lived* life' there is always 'a bit of the past and a somewhat smaller bit of the future'.<sup>66</sup> The intermingling of past and present in subjective time (for example, the way people can simultaneously live two different moments through the operation of dreams or memories) is qualitatively different from the temporal experience of forms, where time appears as a series of particular and separate instants.<sup>67</sup> Lived time, unlike the spatialisation of time in forms, is 'never only what it represents at a given moment, it is always "more"', since it 'contains its past history within itself in a more immediate form than does any morsel of the inorganic world'.<sup>68</sup> As is well known, this position owes a great deal to Henri Bergson. Bergsonian *durée*, lived time, is opposed to divisible, mechanistic time which Bergson associated with space, with a quantitative and statistically based succession of moments.<sup>69</sup> Likewise, Simmel establishes a fundamental opposition between life and mechanism, and an ideal temporal dimension resistant to mechanism, the difference being

that Simmel applies the Bergsonian view to the social function of time. Here people possess what amounts to an essence that bypasses the mechanistic aspect of social time.

Looking at the transformation of individual will by forms is a way of elaborating this position. In Simmel's view of life as such, there is no clear divide between intention and effect. The result of an intention, rather than simply being a stage in a mechanical development, is to an extent inscribed within it from the start. Pleasure for instance is derived not so much as a consequence of completing some long task, but is stimulated by the very process of getting there.<sup>70</sup> On this view, intention and effect respond to one another in an uninterrupted flow: they are different aspects of the same process. There may be an inversion of the causal link between the two, since the intention may be described as being generated by the effect just as plausibly as the other way around. Here intentionality or causality is tied to its own past and directed towards its future, not in sequence but concurrently, thus suggesting links between two otherwise distinct temporal moments. That willed activity can represent not just one but many things is opposed to mechanistic views of such activity and bypasses the succession of

<sup>66</sup> Simmel 1971; 359, italics in original.

<sup>67</sup> Simmel 1971; 359–60.

<sup>68</sup> Simmel 1968; 27–8, 28. In another passage Simmel compares the temporal aspect of life with the operation of a spring mechanism: the 'later form of an organism which is capable of growth and procreation is contained in every single phase of organic life. The inner necessity of organic evolution is far profounder than the necessity that a wound-up spring will be released. While everything inorganic contains only the present moment, living matter extends itself in an incomparable way over history and future' (p. 28).

<sup>69</sup> See Derrida cited and discussed in Stallabrass 1992: 208. See also Kolakowski 1972; 156, 174, 178–9.

<sup>70</sup> See Simmel 1978; 204.

particular moments central to the operation of forms. Conversely, will governed by forms is an event rather than a process, apparent in the way that action mirrors the temporal discontinuity of forms. An obvious example would be the experience of time in factory work. Here there is no meaningful sense in which each repetitive action is built on previous ones; rather, activity here may be thought of as a sequence of independent events, none of which give any consideration to the ones that preceded them. In this context time does not flow evenly but is experienced as a disjointed and broken rhythm: constant change is interrupted by sudden shifts that Simmel would scarcely call motion. On this view, industrial workers may be seen not as whole beings but as accumulations of a series of disconnected stages, shifting between one stage and the next without any transitions between them. In Simmel's terms, this is hardly the result of a life in perpetual motion.

It becomes clear, then, that Simmel tries to compensate for the effects of powerful formal systems with a spiritual complement, a purely human interiority that is entirely free from formalism, but in doing so he abandons the social world to formal, deterministic conventions. If there is no connection between spiritual freedom and modern society, then there is no way to breach the boundaries or resolve the contradictions between them. This view sanctions the fundamental opposition and says only that the pursuit of freedom and individuality will have

to occur somewhere else. Formal discipline is seen as an unavoidable feature of the modern social order, which must be accepted as it is. What can be said is that formalism is sustained at the same time as it is transcended.

In Simmel's work it is clear that humans and the systems they create are split between forces that are both opposed to and complemented by one another. The paradox is that the forces pressing on the human psyche are ultimately the consequence of its own actions, to the extent that, 'Frequently it appears as if the creative movement of the soul was dying from its own product'.<sup>71</sup> For Simmel at least, this effect is the result not of a damaged world which, through action taken to change it, might be improved; rather it is in the nature of life itself: 'This dualism, sustained in full sharpness, not only fails to contradict the unity of life, but is indeed the very way in which its unity exists'.<sup>72</sup> That Simmel sees the dehumanising effects of modern life as inevitable, if not desirable, is made very clear in the following passage:

The concept of all culture is that the spirit creates something independent and objective, through which the development of the subject from itself to itself makes its way. But, in so doing, this integrating and culturally determining element is predestined to an autonomous development, which still consumes the forces of human subjects, and still draws such subjects into its orbit, without elevating them to its own height [...]. This is the real tragedy of culture [...] – the fact that the annihilating forces aimed against an entity stem from the deepest layers of this very entity [...].<sup>73</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Simmel 1968; 31.

<sup>72</sup> Simmel 1971; 372.

<sup>73</sup> Simmel 1997b; 72.

So this most basic opposition between the self and the forms it produces, while being the greatest tragedy, and one from which many others must follow, is only apparently paradoxical, for life can 'enter reality only in the form of its antithesis, that is, only in the form of *form*'.<sup>74</sup>

Plainly Simmel's work contains an uncompromising focus on the administered and regulated aspects of modernity, and also a degree of melancholia for the lost virtues of an integral and meaningful life. Above all, however, Simmel produces a bleak vision of a social world in which the processes of abstraction and assimilation present themselves as an eternal and inescapable destiny. Further, there

is very little faith here in the possibility of any kind of effective resistance. Even if we leave aside Simmel's relativist way of thinking, the way content has so little importance within the systems he describes suggests that all action has unexpected consequences and may eventually participate fully in the workings of pre-existing formal systems that connect with nothing outside themselves.<sup>75</sup> This applies just as much to critical or radical content that takes a position outside those systems in an attempt to counter their influence: such oppositional content may merely demonstrate how systems are capable of self-critique and self-correction.

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<sup>74</sup> Simmel 1968; 25, emphasis in original.

<sup>75</sup> To give a contemporary example, it may be useful to consider how far political activism taken up online, where oppositional content has to be expressed through formal means and structures with their own autonomous operation and their own unintended consequences, can be read in terms of Simmel's theories. In many ways, such activism might actually be strengthened by an awareness of the full extent of its own possibilities and limits.

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## SANTRAUKA

### SIMMELIS APIE SOCIALINIŲ FORMŲ AUTONOMIŠKUMĄ

Straipsnyje įrodinėjama, kad Georgo Simmelio moderniosios visuomenės ir kultūros teorijos teikia reikšmingas išvalgas, padedančias suvokti sistemų, kurias esame apgyvendinę, autonomiškumo problemas. Pirmiausiai aptariamos Simmelio idėjos, kurių akiratyje – individo savasties ir išorinio pasaulio vienybės jausena. Paskui analizuojamas procesas, kuriame ši jausena kinta gyvenimui fragmentuojantis į autonomiškas formalias sistemas, saistomas su modernybės reiškiniu. Šios formos analizuojamos sutelkiant dėmesį į jų vidinį funkcionavimą. Baigiamojoje straipsnio dalyje artikuliuojami metmenys, kurių paskirtis – atliktą analizę įtraukti į potencialių socialinių pokyčių diskursą. Pagrindinis rekomenduojamo diskurso klausimas yra tas: ar ir kaip tokia kritinė praktika gali būti paveiki ir kaip ji gali tapti uždara sistema, nepajėgiančia keisti savo aplinkos?

Gauta: 2012 12 02 10

Pateikta spaudai: 2012 12 27

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