

GEORG SIMMEL AND THE METROPOLITIZATION OF SOCIAL LIFE



Georg Simmel (1858-1918). 1901 photo

1. Biography: life and works

Georg Simmel was born on 1 March, 1858 in Berlin, the seventh child of Jewish parents who converted: his father to Catholicism and his mother to an evangelical cult in which Georg was brought up as well. Upon the death of his father in 1874, Julius Friedländer, the founder of the Peters musical editions, became his guardian and would later adopt him. After attending the "Friedrich Werder" Gymnasium, he enrolled at Humboldt University in Berlin in 1876. He attended the history courses and seminars of Theodor Mommsen, studied psychology under Moritz Lazarus and Heymann Steinthal, the founders of the *Völkerpsychologie*, and philosophy under Friedrich Harms and the historian of Greek thought, Eduard Zeller.

In 1885 he achieved the qualification of *Privatdozent* (lecturer), and took on his university teaching duties. His lectures stimulated great interest, and were hence attended more than the official courses. In 1890 he published his first book, *Über soziale Differenzierung. Soziologische und psychologische Untersuchungen* (Social differentiation. Sociological and Psychological Research), in which he addresses the issue of the foundations of sociology as a science. In the same year he married Gertrud Kinel, who published a number of philosophical essays under the pseudonym of Marie Luise Enckendorff. From their union Simmel's son Hans was born. He later fathered a daughter, Angi, with Gertrud Kantorowicz, both of whom were persecuted by the Nazi, as was his son Hans,.

After a series of brief essays on money, in 1900 he publishes the important work *Philosophie des Geldes* (Philosophy of money), in which contains the core of his philosophy on culture. One year later the University of Berlin named him *professor extraordinaire* of philosophy. His lectures here were very popular also with Russian, Polish and Hebrew students, as well as with many women (he was amongst the first teachers to allow them to audit university lessons), a policy frowned upon by the conservative academic Berlin circles. In 1909 with Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies and Werner Sombart he founded the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie* (German Society of Sociology), becoming a member of the managing/executive committee (he would step down some years later, motivating his resignation by the fact that his interests had by then turned purely philosophical). In 1910 opened the first conference of society in Frankfurt am Main with the report *Soziologie der Geselligkeit* (Sociology of sociability).

In 1914 (at the age of 56) he was nominated for the tenured post of professor of philosophy at Strasburg, reluctantly leaving his beloved Berlin (which honoured him by publishing a newspaper article entitled "Berlin without Simmel"). For Simmel, World War I, which broke out that very year, symbolized the gravity of the crisis in modern culture and the possibility of overcoming it. Therefore, at the beginning of the war he espoused nationalistic positions and, together with Max Weber, committed himself to the "internal front", even holding lectures for soldiers. Such choice has been bitterly criticized by his ex-students György Lukács and Ernst Bloch. *Lebensanschauung. Vier metaphysische Kapitel* (The View of life. Four metaphysical Essays), considered his philosophical testament, was published in 1918. He died on 28 September of the same year in Strasburg.

2. Historical context – "classical German sociology"

Between the 19th and 20th centuries German social thought considered the metropolis a model in miniature of western civilization. For thinkers such as Max Weber, Werner Sombart, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Georg Simmel, it surely represented the social organization that most clearly revealed *modernity* in all its most extreme and paradoxical manifestations, and provided the best sociological vantage point to grasp the ongoing formidable transformations of the urban landscape: the birth of the *boulevards*; the spread of iron and glass architectural structures dedicated to economic consumption (such as the *passages* and department stores) and transport (railway stations); changes in the field of aesthetics, culture and customs thanks to the spread of fashion, advertising and daily newspapers; profound changes in the perception of space and time consequent to great technical innovations such as railroads, artificial lighting, radio, telephone, photography, and cinema. Georg Simmel and the founders of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie* contributed to interpreting and elaborating on this new form of metropolitan culture. The metropolis as a general *social form* of modernity has fundamental importance in both their works and their lives.

At the turn of the 20th century, Ferdinand Tönnies, Georg Simmel and Max Weber, albeit in different ways, cast doubt on the idea of progress as the explanation for the social changes under way and once again pose the question of what was to be the subject matter and basis of sociology. Whether considering Comte and Saint Simon's law of three stages, Marx's historical materialism, or Herbert Spencer's general law of evolution, what was knowable was the (presumed) certainty that society would progress to the next development stage. This form of knowledge, though founded on various forms of philosophy of history, enabled an analysis of the present: it was believed that by virtue of such knowledge it was possible to understand the fundamental social structures, the dominant social forces in the future, and the social problems that would develop catastrophically for society. Whereas during the 19th century sociology represented the queen of sciences, in that it set its sights on the most complex subject, that is society, certainty with regard to the future served the function of considerably reducing such complexity.

Sociologists' doubts with regard to progress was not an isolated phenomenon, but rather reflected widespread pessimism in all social layers of German society and found expression in philosophical, cultural and artistic circles. It arose firstly for economic reasons, that is, because of the "Great Depression" in Germany (1873-1896), which had eroded the trust and optimism of preceding years, especially among the economically active segments of the population. Within *élite* intellectual circles such pessimism could be partly explained as a reaction to the optimism of the period immediately following the unification of Germany, and to the workers' and feminist movements, as events that upset the traditional social order.

More specifically, there are *three* fundamental orientations that characterize "modern sociology", and that involved Simmel, Weber, Tönnies, as well as Durkheim in an analogous manner [Rammstedt 1988, 280 ss.]. Firstly, modern sociology espouses the positivistic apology of reality. No longer does current social reality need to be viewed as mere appearance waiting for the advent of a *truer* form of social coexistence that the sociologist must be able to foresee. Limiting all investigation to that which *is*, rather than that which must be, raises the issue of how to classify, collect and choose the social phenomena that present themselves, which are chosen on the basis of their *modernity* – thereby describing sociology's *second* fundamental orientation as a discipline seeking to institutionalize itself. Placing that which is "modern" at the core of its research interests – more or less explicitly – signifies recognising the autonomous sufficiency of *now* as a specific quality of the present that is historically non-investigable, in that it is essentially characterized by the attribute of *novelty*. For Simmel this limiting of research and assessment to the phenomena that characterize the essential aspects of the concept of modernity leads to that particular perspective which he defines as "aesthetic perspective" (*ästhetische Betrachtung*), according to which "the typical must be uncovered in that which is unique, that which follows a law in that which is random, the essence and meaning of things in the superficial and the transitory" [Simmel 2004, 178].

Lastly, there is the reiterated, emphatic issue of the true subject of sociology, on whose basis sociology itself should be able to establish its legitimacy as an academic discipline. All the "modern classics" of sociology, dismissed "society" as the subject of sociology and presented other concepts in its place: Simmel refers to the "association" (*Vergesellschaftung*), which better expresses the dynamic element and relations in social life; Weber addresses the category of "social action"; Durkheim, the "collective conscience"; even Tönnies, who while remaining attached to the concept of "society", defined it as system of exchange relationships. An overview of sociology at the turn of the century therefore reveals how the semantically ambiguous, excessively comprehensive concept of "society" came to be replaced by other conceptions deemed more suitable to express the specifically "modern" modalities of social life.

3. The metropolization of society: the problem of sociology

A sociology with these characteristics could not but take on the “metropolitan reality” as its priority subject, the melting pot for the production of the “new” *par excellence*. Although all Simmel’s work is pervaded by a “metropolitan spirit”, he expressly devoted only one essay to the topic, *The metropolis and the mental life* (1903), which is actually the transcript of a lecture presented at the *Gehe-Stiftung* in Dresden. This small essay sums up the main topics of both *Social Differentiation* (1890) and, especially, of the *Philosophy of money* (1900), wherein Simmel completes a wide-ranging philosophical, sociological and aesthetic analysis of the monetary economy, which for the most part coincides with the metropolitan culture. Moreover, as we will see, many of his essays address metropolitan life, either directly or indirectly. His most important ones, published as a collection in the 1911 book entitled *Philosophical Culture*, in fact include his famous essay on *Fashion, Adventure, Coquetry, Female culture, and the Concept and tragedy of culture*. No less important are his essays on *Discretion, Gratitude, Ornament, Shame, and Sociability*. Naturally, for reasons of space, it is impossible to delve into or even provide an overview of all the sociological insights offered by these essays. However, in the pages that follow I will try to show that, to a large extent, the metropolis represents a coherent development of Simmel’s philosophical and sociological thought.

In 1908 Simmel published his major sociological work, *Sociology* (frequently also called *große Soziologie* to distinguish it from the 1917 *kleine Soziologie*). The first, fundamental chapter of this work is entitled *The problem of sociology*. Simmel’s sociological proposition stems from the need for conceptual clarification: he believes that sociology can establish itself as a specific *science* only if it gives up the goal of having new *subject matter* – one that is not already dealt with by one of the many existing human sciences – and seeks instead only a new point of view that can trace a “*new line through historical facts*” so as to highlight within them some specific determinations that are not considered by the other sciences. According to such perspective, “*sociology would be a new method, a heuristic principle aimed at penetrating the phenomena of all those fields in a new way*”. Such a perspective can be achieved provided that the concept of *society* is subjected to differentiation so as to distinguish between its *form* and its *content*. The “reasons” that prompt individuals to form a society can be defined as the “contents”: they compel individuals to exert “reciprocal action” on each other, which may be of a very different order and can take on various *forms*, from the most transitory to the most stable and long-lasting.

The concept of “reciprocal action”, which translates the German term *Wechselwirkung* (also referable to the “effect of reciprocity”), has fundamental importance in the entire thought of Simmel. It stands to indicate a general conception of reality as network of reciprocal influence between a multitude of elements. It is both a philosophical and metaphysical conception, by which all life’s phenomena – not only social ones – are interconnected by a relation of interchange and reciprocal causation: no single element can be isolated and comprehensive in its oneness, but only by being in dynamic interaction with all the others, in an endless series of action and *retroaction*. This dynamic-process conception of reality opposes mechanistic application of the principle of cause and effect in order to understand life phenomena. Domination and subordination, competition and cooperation, imitation, the division of work, and formation of parties are merely some of the infinite *forms* that reciprocal action between men can take the moment they meet and come together in a unit. The particular individual forms of reciprocal action make up what can be defined, in general, as “association” (*Vergesellschaftung*).

Society as such does not exist. Simmel judges it as a “mystical” entity: it is but the product of reciprocal influence relations between human beings. As he himself wrote: “*society is the name by which we indicate a circle of individuals tied one to the other by various forms of reciprocity*” [Simmel 1983, 42]. Moreover, the various forms of reciprocity have a tendency to settle over time and to become stable for a certain period of time: the great systems and organizations that we think of when we speak of “society” (the State in first place) can be conceived of as “*forms of reciprocity between individuals, prolonged in time and transformed into stable, self-sufficient formations having a well defined physiognomy*” [Simmel 1983, 41-42]. This image of society, viewed as the “*sum of reciprocal interactions*”, from the longer-lasting ones that crystallize into configurations such as the family or the state, to the more ephemeral and transitory ones, such as a simple exchange of glances, can be linked to the metropolitan *milieu*.

HOW IS SOCIETY POSSIBLE IN THE METROPOLIS? THE A PRIORI OF SOCIAL LIFE

The first chapter of *Sociology* contains an *excursus* with an expressly Kantian title: *How is society possible?* Simmel was not satisfied to simply shift the focus of his interests to the “association” (*Vergesellschaftung*) among individuals and study its manifold forms, but sought to delve into its transcendental conditions of existence. As already stated, the question that he poses is a *phenomenological one* concerning the make up in individuals of that

particular subject that is the world of others [Dal Lago 1994, 173].

According to Simmel the point of departure for the theory of social experience lies in the relation of the “me” with the “you” in social interaction; this represents the fundamental epistemological problem of the process of association. Given that the individual is faced with the presence of the “you” in social reality, he must equip himself with a clear and constant “image” (*Bild*) in the context of three fundamental elements of his associative bonds. First of all, an image of the other must be formed, that is an image of the “you” that he associates with. Then, he must understand the image that the other has of himself. Lastly, he must develop an image regarding his own position in the objective structure of society. For Simmel these represent the three *a priori* of social experience based on which all the social relations are structured.

4.1 THE OTHER AS A SOCIAL TYPE

The first of the sociological *a priori* (conditions) stem from the realisation that in social relations the “you” can by definition only be knowable partially. It is only the formation of “type images” of the other that enables the existence of society as an “objective representation of several subjective consciences”. Through his analysis of this first *a priori* (condition) Simmel introduces a concept of “social type” that recalls the famous notion of the “ideal type” formulated by Max Weber. As for the latter concept, here we are also dealing with a “necessary pretence” to aid understanding, which comes through an exaggeration of some features present in reality to the detriment of others, and which, in its totality, would otherwise remain unfathomable. The other therefore always remains an incomplete, somewhat “virtual” representation, as does our own *Ego*: “we are all only fragments not only of man, in general, but also of ourselves. We are all rough sketches not only of the type man, in general, but also of that individuality and uniqueness of that which is ourselves... which surrounds, nearly drawn with ideal lines, our perceivable reality” [Simmel 1998, 31]. For Simmel the individual is a fictitious unit, a conventional conceptual creation, as are the concepts of “society” and “history”.

In his essay *The metropolis and the mental life* Simmel had after all already noted the “temptation to present ourselves in a keen, concise, possibly characteristic way, this is in fact exceedingly stronger in this case [in the case of the metropolis, AN] that wherever the frequency and the duration of meetings furnishes to each an unequivocal image of the personality of the other” [Simmel 1996, 53]. This also explains the attention Simmel dedicated to the analysis of the “connection” between the psychic life of individuals and its visible manifestations: his analyses of fashion, ornaments, and the aesthetic significance of the face. The knowledge a person possesses can be gleaned not only from one aspect (the intellect foremost), but from the whole of the body and soul. In this regard Simmel refers to “a circle” between the internal aspect and the external, of a “comingling” between man’s interiority and his external aspect, as well as of the “necessity” that his mediation be able “to cast a bridge over the abyss that separates the self from the not-self” (ivi). Every relation between one individual and another is premised by the relation between the individual’s psychic life and its external manifestations, such as gestures, facial expressions, but obviously also attire and *body language* in general. These, as well as other aspects of his social analysis, highlight Simmel’s contribution to a *realistic* theory of every day interaction, in that it seeks to describe the actual dynamics of the social world, as manifested in *lived* (not merely rational) reality (both bodily and spiritual).

4.2 PARTIAL KNOWLEDGE OF THE OTHER

The second *a priori* (condition) concerns the relation of the individual to the “type” images that others make of him, or to apply a term that Simmel never used, the individual's relation to social “expectations” or “roles”. In particular, as Simmel observed, every one of us is something *more* than the role that society has assigned us, and this “something more” does not remain inert while we are being socialized, but is equally determinant in our socialization. This *a priori* (condition), which can be summed up by the apparently banal assertion that “life is not entirely social” [Simmel 1998, 33], is at the basis of his analyses of the forms of social exclusion set forth in his *Sociology*, as well as those described in *Poor man, the Enemy* and especially *the Foreigner*. Indeed, all these figures have in common the fact that their position in society is inexorably determined by that which is in no way socializable in them.

The foreigner (like the poor, the alienated and in general all those who have, for various reasons, been *excluded* from social relations) is one of the most interesting cases of human relations with others. Indeed, the foreigner is to a certain degree *the other* par excellence, that is to say, someone who for objective reasons (geographical origins, belonging to a different culture) eludes relations, but is necessarily situated within them (we necessarily associate with foreigners, foreigners are *foreign* only by virtue of their relation to us). “The foreigner is an element of the

group itself, not unlike the poor and many “enemies within” – an element whose immanent position as a member implies simultaneously *out of and in front of*” [Simmel 1998, 580].

The basic definition that Simmel gives of the foreigner is simple, but suggestive: the foreigner is not “the pilgrim who comes today and is gone tomorrow, on the contrary... he is he who comes today and remains tomorrow – in a manner of speaking the potential pilgrim who, though not having kept on moving, has not entirely overcome the absence of bonds of coming and going” [ivi].

Such a definition confirms the *liminal* nature of the foreigner’s situation, his being a *borderline* figure, or in other terms, his situation of *ambiguity*: he is not a social type that has totally eluded bonds (as in the case of the pilgrim, who sociologically would seem inert, in that he is indifferent to the social group), nor is he a stable element, *organic* to the group. The social type of the foreigner therefore involves both spatial and temporal uncertainty: he is someone who is nearby, and at the same time, far, present bodily, but absent in his social and cultural determinateness. The foreigner is therefore a cognitive category, necessary for the identity of any social group.

An analogous problem in cognitive sociology is the focus of the chapter on “The secret and the secret society”, whose underlying assumption is precisely the incomplete (in the end, impossible) knowability of the other, together with the possibility that he can lie: “if human association is influenced by the ability to speak [...] it is determined by the ability to keep silent” [Simmel 1998, 323]. Here Simmel highlights an essential factor on which contemporary society is based: *trust*. It is in fact a social practice founded on the uncertainty and incompleteness of the information available about *partners* in any interaction. Moreover, the advancement of rationality and knowledge does not necessarily involve a reduction in uncertainty, but on that of *trust* (and *faith*) that the surrounding world bases on knowledge and competence. In other words, through his sociology of the secret, Simmel lays the bases for a sociology of common *sense/consensus* that accounts for the necessary *opacity* of social forms.

4.3 THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE INDIVIDUAL

The third, and last *a priori (condition)* is generally called “profession”, and it echoes the topics also evoked by Weber’s reflections on *Beruf*, the professional “vocation” or “calling” that characterizes the biography of modern man as if it were an inalterable *fate*. Simmel maintains that individuals only establish social interaction because they are to some extent aware that the very society whose existence they favour provides the possibility of finding a place where their individuality can adapt most harmoniously: “that every individual is, in and of himself, directed by his character toward one determined position within his social *milieu*; that this position, which ideally belongs to him, is also actually present within the social complex – this is the presupposition based on which the individual lives his social life and which can be defined as the value of universality inherent in individuality” (ivi, 37). Therefore, from the individual’s perspective, society takes on a teleological role and is viewed as a sensible goal for expression of his possibilities.

Various interpretations have been offered of this last statement – and more generally of the passages in Sociology that Simmel devotes to discussion of his third *a priori (condition)* – in order to insert it within the framework of functionalism. In this regard, it is worthwhile stressing that Simmel’s *a priori (condition)* does not necessarily seek to claim that society has certain positions and roles, essential for its proper functioning, that individuals are called upon to take on, and that the duty of the individual would therefore be exclusively to answer this “calling” (*Beruf*), slavishly conforming to society’s functional and reproductive needs.

4.4 THE "GREY ZONE" OF SOCIAL ACTION

Among the sociological *a priori (conditions)* that Simmel envisioned as governing the relations between individuals and society, there is another, albeit less known, more concealed one, intimately connected to the others, that is to say, that which considers that the social actor can also be a *non actor*. Twentieth-century sociology (Max Weber above all) was characterized by the loss of trust in progress and rejection of the idea that the aim of sociology is to study “society”. Simmel realized that centring study on the “actions of man” serves to maintain a “progressive” perspective, because the tacit assumption underlying the fact that people act is that they do so because they believe in a future different from the present. In this sense, sociology, conceived of as a theory of action, precludes access to what is instead, in a certain sense, the very opposite of the idea of action (necessarily directed towards the future): *pessimism*, which manifests itself through the “suffering” (*leiden*) of society.

Leiden: literally to suffer, endure, passively bear – this term is as present in Nietzsche as in Max Weber. Simmel describes it in terms of its consequences for the social action [Simmel 1900, 71]. For Simmel “suffering” is the individual’s balance sheet, which shows that life’s disbursements vs. its earnings are just not worth it. Pessimism is

the reflex of social alienation and is manifested through *suffering*, the counter-concept to *acting*. Pessimistic suffering, the feeling of being estranged by one's own self, is inaccessible to the theory of action: it only becomes comprehensible as "actions" (albeit desperate ones), and hence as suicide, aggression, violence, etc., and is thus deemed dysfunctional.

The sociological importance of this intuition is vast and highly relevant. It can help understand the deep motivations for "negative actions", or more properly, "non action" (such as for instance, wilful unemployment, not having children, not being committed politically to changing society's power relations, etc.) from a sociological point of view as social situations determined by the lack of *trust* that the future holds the promise of a different social condition from the present: all present actions are influenced and determined by expectations for the future.

5. METROPOLIS, MONETARY CULTURE AND THE INTENSIFICATION OF NERVOUS LIFE

Although his entire work is pervaded by a "metropolitan spirit", if we wish to understand *the experience of the metropolis* according to Simmel, we cannot but focus our attention on the famous essay *The metropolis and the life of the spirit* (1903).

As stated in the beginning of the essay, Simmel's intent is to try "to investigate the products of specifically modern life with regard to their interiority"[Simmel 1995, 35-36], in such way as to discover "the equation between the individual and supra-individual contents of life" to which the metropolis as a social formation gives rise. It is important to stress the originality of Simmel's approach, as the metropolis he considered is truly and fundamentally an *experience*, in the sense expressed by the German term *Erleben*. This has a particular consequence for a more strictly sociological analysis: in this perspective the metropolis is neither a purely objective formation, nor an exclusively subjective experience. It is rather set midway between individual and object, where individual subjectivity and objective social formation coincide. This is immediately evident from the extremes points of the analysis that Simmel conducts in the essay, which correspond to "intellectualism" and the predominance of the monetary economy. Intellectualism and money are two, respectively subjective and objective, aspects of the metropolitan *Erleben*.

The psychological trait on which the metropolitan personality is based is in fact represented by the "intensification of nervous life" (*Steigerung des Nervenlebens*) produced by the rapid, relentless alternation of external and internal impressions, the result of which is that the individual cannot react with the deepest layers of his psyche, but has to create a sort of defence organ, the "intellect" (*Verstand*). The intellect is the sum of the more conscious, transparent and higher faculties of the psyche and is hence further removed from the deep layers of the personality. It is essentially based on deliberation and objective neutrality when approaching things and relations.

It is precisely for this reason that intellectualism and money are strictly linked. Money, like the intellect, is indifferent with regard to all that is purely individual. By virtue of its exchange value, it becomes the means through which to express both the highest creations of the spirit, as well as the rawest, material things, in terms of their lowest common denominator – their price [Simmel 1995, 43].

Intellectualism and the rule of the monetary economy are epitomized in the characteristic metropolitan psychological type – the *blasé* individual. *Blasé* means bored, uninterested, detached. Such an attitude stems from the concentrated effects of the contradictory nervous stimuli characterizing the metropolitan *milieu*. The nerves are subjected to such strong inputs that they eventually stop reacting to the stimuli with the vigour that they would normally. In addition to this peculiarity: "The essence of the *blasé* being consists of the numbing of sensitivity to the differences between things" [ivi].

Simmel considers the metropolis to be the culmination of the process of "differentiation", to which he devoted his first study in 1890. In this work he adopted Herbert Spencer's "fundamental theorem" of the law of evolution: in nature, just as in human societies (even at the level of the individual personality), a process of differentiation occurs from the "homogeneous to the heterogeneous", from a simple unit of homologous elements to a multitude of functionally diversified elements. Functionally diversified organisms manage to attain their goals, among which the primary one of survival, with lower energy consumption, and therefore represent a superior stage of evolution.

Money is the most representative symbol of this process: it is *pure energy* (Kraft). At the same time, it is also a symbol of *energy saving*, which enables reducing friction and conserving strength. Indeed, the sole fact that all economic transactions are made in money affords energy saving with respect to the traditional practice of exchanging goods. Nevertheless, for Simmel this process is neither wholly positive nor wholly painless, but involves that which he defines the "tragedy of modern culture", for which, once again, the metropolis is the preferred setting. In the essay considered here he describes it as the "preponderance of the objective spirit over the subjective spirit",

that is to say, the greater perfection and efficiency of the process of differentiation does not translate into an equally great increase in the differentiation and refinement of individual culture.

5.1 THE INTERSECTION OF SOCIAL CIRCLES

In Simmel's experience of the metropolis one question, which he formulates at the beginning of the essay, is foremost: "The most profound problems of modern life stem from the individual's presumption to preserve independence and the particularity of his being determined against the preponderant forces of society, of historical inheritance, external culture and technique" [Simmel 1995, 35]¹. The problem of individuality, "concern over the survival of a differential subjectivity in modern society" [Lichtblau 1997, 83], represented a constant source of worry for Simmel since his earliest works. However, rather than the survival of individuals, Simmel's aim for the individual is to avoid "subvival": to be able to realize the possibilities offered by the "luxuriant development of objective culture?"

Simmel formulated a concept that can be considered key for the sociological analysis of individuality: *social entourage* (*sozialer Kreis*). In its native state every social formation is set up as a relatively narrow circle, strictly closed against other nearby circles, but with such tight internal cohesion as to grant individuals only a very limited range of action with regards to both the development of their particular qualities or their free, responsible movements. Beginning with this stage, social evolution moves simultaneously in two different, though nonetheless complementary, directions. As the social group grows – in number, size, importance and life contents – its internal unity is promptly loosened; the clarity of its original borders is mitigated by relations and connections with other group. At the same time, individuals gain freedom of movement that goes well beyond the ties initially set by strict affiliation with the group and develop a specificity and a peculiarity that are made possible and necessary by the social division of work within the extended social group.

A particularly emblematic case of this developmental scheme of individuality is represented by urban life. Life in small cities, in antiquity as in the Middle Ages, imposed such limitations of movement and relations with the outside on individuals, that modern man would feel suffocated. On the other hand, thanks to the expansiveness of its territory and the size of its population, the metropolis offers incomparably greater space for development of the personality. It is in these social spaces that we can properly speak of individuality: "the determinateness of the personality becomes greater when the circles determining it are found near each other than when they are concentric" [Simmel 1995, 123]. In the metropolis it is in fact possible that the circles to which an individual belongs are relatively or completely independent, also with the possibility of their being in competition or in contrast with each other, thereby furnishing the maximum space for realization of personal peculiarities.

At the same time, this process of social differentiation – which constitutes the sociological premise of modern subjectivity – also turns out to be disorienting for the individual. Modern society presents itself to the individual in a profoundly *ambivalent* fashion: on the one hand, it offers room to growth, on the other it takes away centredness and "character" from the individual, fragmenting the personality among various spaces for its realization. Multiple groups of affiliation seem to create a situation in which none becomes truly binding or influential, making social life more and more attenuated – a pure game in which to participate for the hedonistic and play purposes of *distinction*. As we will see in the following, Simmel delved into the *aesthetical* mechanisms that individuals use in the difficult art of *distinguishing themselves* and (at the same time) *imitating* others, above all through the analysis of phenomena such as fashion, style, ornament, and in general all his writings that can be collected on the issue of the defence of personal intimacy. In the social circle individuals both *recognizes* and *lose themselves*. "Recognition because it provides a way to differentiate oneself, to affirm one's own identity; loss, nonetheless, because those symbolic means of differentiation are not individual, but rather common to a wide circle of individuals".

5.2 THE TWO FORMS OF INDIVIDUALISM

In the essay on the metropolis Simmel mentions those that had elsewhere called the *two forms of individualism*. The metropolis is in fact the arena, the birthplace of the contrast between and the attempts at conciliation of these two patterns. They can be defined the individualism of independence (or of *equality*) and the individualism in the development of originality and personal peculiarity (or of *difference*). The individualism of *equality* stems from the assumption that all individuals are *by nature* equal and have equal rights to liberty. This harks back to the tradition

¹ On this issue, which represented *the* question for Simmel over the course of his reflections, see also [D'Andrea 1999, De Simone 2002 and Rammstedt 2003].

of natural law and its victory against the political inequalities imposed by nature. The individualism of *difference*, instead has its roots in romanticism and Goethe, and maintains the value of the uniqueness of the individual and the right to be distinguished and not confused by all others. While the foundations of the individualism of equality lie in “the universal man” present in every single individual, in case of the individualism of difference it is the “**qualitative irreplaceably of the individual**” that is at its basis.

The originality and the importance of Simmel’s conceptions consists precisely in having introduced and analyzed this second type of individualism. Far from the being romantic nostalgia or a problem specific to the “**absolutely great**”, such as Goethe, Rembrandt or other exceptional artistic personalities, the philosophical and sociological problem of *distinction* and the upholding of individual peculiarity is established as one the essential characteristics in the cultural setting of modernity . Such conceptions reveal the profound affinity between the cultural climate of Simmel’s time and our own. The spread of *mass individualism* seems to be a fundamental trait of contemporary society. It is manifest and analyzed in an extremely different and heterogeneous manner: the obsessive search for *distinction* through extremely stylized consumer goods; the trying out of new *life styles* inspired by particular (aesthetic, ethical, religious) principles; and more in general through “excessive” manifestations of personality, that can be traced to the psychological complex of *narcissism* .

In his “metropolitan scene” Simmel seems to have observed an aspect that was later to become a characteristic trait of our highly diversified society: individual personality and social personality can no longer coincide entirely with “work”. If we wanted to apply Simmel’s categories of metropolitan individualism creatively to the current cultural setting, it could be said that concerns over how individuals can manage to preserve the *independence* and the *peculiarity* of their individuality is the same as that of today’s sociologists – faced with the transformations of the production practices and the ever more important role of consumption in building an individual identity – they question the problematic link between work (and therefore social *role*, which falls within the sphere of the individualism of *equality*, that is, that which, quantitatively and universally, unites all individuals) and the development of individual personality (the need to distinguish oneself and establish a distinct identity).

Therefore, viewing the metropolis as the problem of the reconciliation and the contrast between quantitative individualism and qualitative individualism is a current, fundamental aspect of Simmel’s *experience of the metropolis* in a setting such as contemporary culture – one that can be defined the “metropolitization of society” [Jonas 1995], that is, the extension to the entire social structure of the peculiar cultural characteristics of the large city.

Obviously, Simmel never proposed a specific, unequivocal solution to such problems. Faced with the *tragedy* that necessarily arises for the individual, torn between being like everybody else and at the same time being above all and incomparably one’s own self, he did not find any arrangement, whether ideological or utopian, to achieve in a future socialist societal order. Nor did he view the irreversible individualism of his time with particular optimism or peace of mind. Especially in the final phase of his thought, Simmel seems to have given up on this contradiction as insoluble and to entrust the solitary, detached construction of an *individual life style* with the realization of a Self that can also have general value and social recognisability. In this sense, as has been observed, “the *blasé*, the dandy, or the individual who looks for peace of mind in the aesthetics of detachment are the variants or the possibilities of a individual who is above all philosophical, in short, someone in whom even Simmel can recognize *himself*” [Dal Lago 1994, 122].

6. THE PROBLEM OF STYLE: FASHION AND SOCIABILITY

The concept and the “problem” of style constitute a fundamental element in Simmel’s aesthetic and social analysis, one with which he foresees some contemporary sociological trends on the cultural processes of urban phenomena.

The specifically modern need for a personal individual “lifestyle”, which Simmel placed at the centre of his diagnosis of the time, stemmed from the ever increasing manifestations of subjectivism, which at the turn of the century was fed by the loss of meaning of tradition, the waning strength of conviction in the world’s great conceptions, and in the manifold offerings of new cultural models for self-realization. It was precisely this “**multitude of styles**” that gave “style”, as an external formal principle, its impelling strength over the behaviour of individual life [Simmel 1984, 652-653]. This limitation of possibilities due to the predominance of a formal principle however represents the consequence of the fact that individuals in modern society do not feel capable of adequately shaping their own personalities to the possibilities offered them to create a unique, distinct way of life. Modern culture is perceived by the individual as something “excessive” in its offerings of possibility paths to

self-realization, so much so as to prompt a search for “support” in shaping their behaviour according to a rigorous formal principle. It is here that we see the true “dictatorship” that style exerts over modern life; it is the objective principle governing the most varied circles of daily life, from furnishings, to table manners, to attire. In modern settings, the greater possibilities for choosing how to shape one’s personality according to a principle requires an explicit “counterweight”, which is expressed through the need to shape oneself according to a formal aesthetic principle [Simmel 2006, 47].

The increasing importance of the external aesthetic aspect in one’s own life conduct is also a consequence of the waning influence of the ethical and moral values transmitted by the community, which were characteristic of pre-industrial society.

Simmel devoted himself to analysing the day-to-day forms of “stylization” in one of the more typical manifestations of modern metropolitan life – fashion. Fashion, one of Simmel’s “masterpiece” essay, offers a rare view of the essential feature of modernity: the “the modification and opposition of life forms”, on the one hand, satisfies the fundamental need for social distinction, and on the other, fosters the egalitarian trend toward the need for belonging.

Fashion combines a tendency towards “distinction” together with a propensity for “imitation”, expressing the fundamental opposition of “individualization” and “association” (*Vergesellschaftung*) that characterizes modernity through a form of stylization of daily life. Moreover, because it incorporates the unconditional search for the fascination of *novelty*, together with the tendency to refer to re-actualized past forms, in terms of time, it is set at the midpoint between past and future, precisely by virtue of its characteristic dynamics, by which the spread of a new fashion to the masses automatically leads to its becoming outdated and hence its replacement with a “new” fashion, initially for the few, but in reality destined to suffer the same fate. This inner self-contradictory mechanism is also the real reason why fashion succeeds, as few other phenomena can, in communicating a feeling of “topicality”

As compared to the true dynamics of historical processes, fashion represents a “movement without time”, a sort of “eternal return of the same”, mythical timeliness that turns up in the heart of the most modern phenomena and that embeds its deepest roots in the workings of the economy based upon the production of goods.

This unreconciled form of opposition between the individual and the general, which finds suitable expression in the phenomenon of fashion, provides the arena for the struggle between “being for oneself” and “being for others”, in which the objectivity of lifestyle is made valid and perceptible for individuals. It is therefore impossible to shape one’s own behaviours and attitudes towards the world according to subjective desires.

Simmel invests analogous importance to other “social games”, such as *modesty*, *discretion*, tact, and especially, *sociability* [Simmel 1983]. Sociability represents a “play form of association” (*Spielform der Vergesellschaftung*), in that it represents a “social game” without no immediate stakes or specifically defined purpose if not the simple pleasure of being together. The main feature of sociability is its autonomy from reality, in the sense of both the objective position that individuals have within the social framework, as well as their independence from the interests and the material motivations that they come to express. According to Simmel, the essential characteristic of any form of sociable “association” it is that, as a matter of principle, it

tends to exclude that which, for the personality, has objective importance, but at the moment, does not directly unite the interested parties. Wealth, social position, erudition, fame, the person’s exceptional qualities and worth no longer have any function and represent, if anything, traces immaterial of a reality that can always insinuate itself into every form of sociability [...]. The only dominant reason is represented by reciprocity as a pure and simple action [Simmel 1983, 81].

For Simmel, meals, social games and all forms of “sociable” interaction, in general, can be considered the *frames* for subjectivity, forms of the *stylization* of individuality, through which the *tragic* weight that bears on it is lightened and alleviated. Style and such forms exonerate the individual from that which, faced with the increasing anonymity inherent in modernity, paradoxically seems to have become a performance principle: be original at all costs. For the individual, these are not “superficial” phenomena: Simmel views “the surface” as ever in contact with the depths of life and the personality. Therefore participating in social games (sociability first and foremost) relieves the individual from the obligation to differentiate, to be serious, from the *tragedy of modernity* : which is expressed by the fact that the individual, according to the terminology adopted various times by Simmel, though being entirely a social *part*, aspires just the same to be an *all*. In other terms, the individual gets caught up in the differentiating gears of the division of labour, and at the same time (*tragically*) aspires to realizing himself as a totality, that is, to develop his own personality in a non-unilateral manner.

Sociability, which in the broad sense can be considered to be within the sphere of *leisure* – the variegated potential

sphere of social interactions lacking any immediate practical goal, which can occur within the context of hedonistic and consumer practices in the narrow sense, but also in social ‘associationism’, disinterested volunteerism, as well as in the practise of sport – offers the aesthetic possibility of *lightening*, *generalization*, and *stylization* of the personality.

7. CASH INHERITANCE

A well-know aphorism contained in Simmel’s *Posthumous Diary* goes: “I know that I will die without spiritual heirs (and this is fine). My inheritance resembles cash to be divided among many heirs, each of whom invests his share in a manner according to his nature, without concerning himself with the origin of such inheritance” [Simmel 1970, 11].

Therefore, tracing the influence of Simmel on contemporary culture and sociology is therefore a very difficult (not to say impossible) enterprise. Nor does concentrating particularly on urban sociology not make the task any easier. It is however possible to seek to at least establish the topicality and adaptability of his thought with regard to the analysis and study of contemporary urban realities.

In general, Simmel’s focus on individuality in the ambivalent game of interaction in the context of the metropolis certainly constitutes an element amongst the most topical in classical sociology. The culture of individualism seems to be a fundamental trait of the so-called “post-modern” society. However, unlike many sociologists and *Kulturkritiker* of the early 20th century, Simmel does not limit himself to issuing the umpteenth lament on the end of the individual or the dominion of *techné*, but inquisitively analyses what individuals do to be up to the possibilities offered by the “luxuriant development of the objective culture.” Also unlike the other classical sociologists (Weber, Durkheim, Marx) Simmel understood that is not possible to come to terms with modernity without considering the dialectics between *work* and *game*, between the realm of *necessity* and that of *leisure*.

Shortly after his death, Simmel became one of the greatest inspirers of that which undoubtedly remains the 20th century’s foremost school of urban sociology: the *Chicago School*. The Chicago School is still remembered for its contributions to urban sociology, particularly for its ecological approach to the study of change in the social and cultural composition of the city and the formation of ethnically and socially homogeneous urban districts, called “natural areas” (cf. the chapter in this book).

Thanks to the mediation of Robert E. Park, who had been his student in Berlin, and the translations of the American *Journal of Sociology*, Simmel became much more widely known and influential in America as a sociologist than as a philosopher in Germany. Whereas Park and his student Everett Stonequist took inspiration from the figure of the *foreigner* and in general the sociology of *the social space* for their analyses of marginality and social migrations, Louis Wirth (in *Urbanism as a way of life*) focussed instead on the impact of metropolitan culture on lifestyle and the personality of large-city dwellers [Segre 2007].

In general, the Chicago School inherits from Simmel his focus on reality as a social construct, based on the reciprocity processes taking place in everyday life. In the context of the urban reality, which tends to overlie the individual element, what takes on particular importance are everyday interactions, the *street corner society* [White 1993]. Simmel was an unparalleled master in promoting keen awareness of this form of ephemeral, transitory, yet fundamental interaction, anticipating the contemporary currents of urban ethnography. To this end, he placed at our disposal various operational concepts such as the foreigner and social space, flirtation and ornament, and especially *sociability*. As has been observed, in this essay Simmel lays the foundations of a sociology of play and *leisure*, just as he opens up to an analysis of the “third space” [Oldenburg 1989, 20-42], that is to say, the places, such as bars, cafés, arcades, hairdressers, that are neither home nor workplace, where the actions and interactions fundamental for understanding metropolitan society come about. In an environment generally hostile to socialization, as cities often are, these places represent islands of disinterested, informal sociality, fundamental for building a sense of community.

Much water has passed under the bridge since the spirit of the time walked along the *boulevards* in Paris or the crossroad between the *Leipzigerstrasse* and *Friedrichstrasse* in the heart of Berlin, where Simmel was born. After over a century urban reality has undergone profound changes and we may even question the very existence of the

subject of analysis: what is the city, the metropolis in today's context of globalization and capital flows? "The intensification of nervous life" caused by the rapid alternation of internal and external impressions, which in Simmel's opinion was the distinctive psychological characteristic of metropolitan life, seems to have been transferred from the *boulevards* to the "non-places" [Augé] of contemporary consumer culture: shopping malls, airports, highways, TV and computer screens. The rapid flow of the signs, images and goods that saturate day-to-day life in contemporary society have become the constitutive trait of the "aestheticization of daily life" of "post-modern culture" [Featherstone 2007]. Simmel's metropolis has thus become one big "endless city" [Bonomi-Abruzzese 2004], beyond the physical and geographical confines of urban reality.