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The Mind of the Modernist
Simmel on time

Lawrence A. Scaff

ABSTRACT. Georg Simmel is known for his 'formal' sociology and discussion of interaction using spatial imagery. Responding to the standard view of Simmel, this article investigates his equally important ideas about time and temporality. In his philosophical and sociological writings Simmel explores the nature of knowledge of the past, mechanistic and organic conceptions of temporality, and the experience and social construction of time-consciousness. The modern money economy encourages a dynamic acceleration and compression of time, while cultural modernity ushers in an 'eternal present'. Simmel's interpretation of time and temporality are central to his thought and contribute to his significance as a social theorist.
KEY WORDS • ecomony • history • interaction • modernity • money • subjectivity

Introduction: Space and Time

Writing shortly after Georg Simmel's death, Siegfried Kracauer (1921) noted the challenge for understanding posed by such a diverse body of work extending over four decades. The center of that work, he suggested, was Simmel's insight into the 'interrelatedness' of things in the world and the observer's responsibility to grasp that interrelatedness in its 'multiplicity as a totality'. This insight then led Simmel to a 'metaphysical' presupposition, Kracauer claimed, according to which the totality or 'world' that we want to understand is bounded by 'objective regularities' on the one hand, and subjective transformation of our 'cultural and spiritual condition' on the other (pp. 320–1). Stating the presupposition in this way is crucial, he believed, because it allows us to see that for Simmel social, cultural and spiritual 'life' moves between two poles: between

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the determinate and fixed forms of life, and the dynamic and shifting substance of life – in other words, between 'timeless' form and 'transcient' content. According to this view, if we follow Simmel's thought, it is thus form, content, and their relatedness that we must understand.

For my purposes Kracauer's formulation of Simmel's problematic is instructive as a starting point because it is alert to the elements of time and temporality that emerge in the full range of his thought, both his philosophy and his sociology. Indeed, one of the striking features about discussions of Simmel is the extent to which the temporal dimension has been ignored. With very few exceptions (e.g. Molseed, 1987) he is typically credited with founding only a 'formal sociology', and in that connection he is characterized most especially as *the* sociologist of space, spatiality and spatial relationships. Simmel himself is partially to blame for this emphasis. After all, in his sociological essays and chapters he makes a great deal of spatial dualisms such as nearness and remoteness, attachment and detachment, or attraction and repulsion as key categories in any framework or schema for social analysis. His brief essay on the 'Stranger', for example, is typical in this regard, with its sweeping assertion 'that spatial relations not only are determining conditions of relationships among men, but are also symbolic of those relationships'. Therefore, 'all personal relations whatsoever can be analyzed in terms of this scheme' built upon spatial models and metaphors (Simmel, 1971: 43, 146). The claim is not an exaggeration. It comes from the chapter of his major *Sociology* entitled 'Space and the Spatial Ordering of Society' (Rammstedt, 1989: 687–790, vol. 11)[1], with its important discussion of social boundaries, mobility, differentiation, stratification, and turning points or revolutions – all given meaning in the language of spatial interactions and relationships. For Simmel it does make sense to think of an entire sociology constructed out of the spatial language and metaphors of distance, distancing and distantiation. His well-known 'formal' discussion of dyads, triads and other more complex forms of human interaction and association is replete with this kind of terminology and perspective (pp. 63–159, vol. 11; Simmel 1908/1950: 87–177.

Furthermore, methodologically Simmel is committed to a kind of 'perspectivism' that acknowledges cognitive differences based on angle of vision, field of focus, and the conditions for knowledge. Defining the 'field' of observation for science is thus significantly an exercise in establishing the appropriate spatial relationship to the objects under investigation, given one's scientific purposes and psychological presuppositions. Of course, as Simmel was fond of saying, one does not have to be Caesar in order to understand Caesar. Indeed, 'understanding' or *verstehen* as such is not a temporal category at all, he emphasizes, even though paradoxically it is a *sine qua non* for recognizing time-bound historical contents (Rammstedt, 1989: 289–90). It belongs to the logic or methodology of inquiry, according to which the relationship between the

observing subject and the observed object is indeterminate: 'indisputable facts of observation are consistent with a number of different psychological infrastructures that are in principle unlimited' (Simmel, 1911/1984: 79). Moreover, cognitive interests matter:

> when we look at human life from a certain distance we see each individual in his precise differentiation from all others. But if we increase our distance, the single individual disappears, and there emerges, instead, the picture of a 'society' with its own forms and colors – a picture which has its own possibilities of being recognized or missed. . . The difference between the two merely consists in the difference between purposes of cognition; and this difference, in turn, corresponds to a difference in distance. (Simmel, 1917/1950: 8)

Simmel in this respect is not so much concerned with what might be called the timeless 'truth-value' of observational reports, but rather with the question: where do we locate ourselves in relation to the subject matter we want to observe and understand? In this respect the essential methodological questions are guided by spatial and not temporal metaphors.

Yet as a careful student of Kant, Simmel could not have avoided thinking about the subject and the world in terms of *both* space and time. There is thus another side to Simmel as philosopher and sociologist, signaled by the language of processes, sequencing, duration, rhythm and tempo, metamorphosis and change (Papilloud and Rol, 2003). Often this non-formalistic or a-structural perspective is most obvious in his focused essays that address a concrete and specific object or an aspect of the varied 'contents' of social life: the city, style or fashion, the visual arts, the ruin, Böcklin's landscapes, the stranger, the secret society, the role played by money. Set apart from 'form' and opposed to it, content itself can be understood as an emergent property. But even in the 'formal' sociology Simmel includes processual elements, as he must in order to understand social interaction or *Wechselwirkung*, his main unit of analysis. Interaction among dyads or triads, for example, can be represented as a timeless form, but it can also be viewed as a temporal process and a subject for narrative. A dyadic relationship, such as marriage, has a definite form and formal rules and roles; but it also includes 'informal' processes of interaction that vary considerably from case to case and across different cultures and epochs. Interactions can approach a limit at which what is typically called 'marriage' disappears. There are analogies in nature: the arrangement of flowing water that we call a 'waterfall' has a singular form, but its 'content' can be described as emergent properties or processes, altered by factors like rate of flow or pattern of erosion, that vary considerably over time and in any given instance – properties that can terminate its very existence as a 'waterfall'. Such processes cannot be observed without assuming an unfolding or a development through time.

But in Simmel's thought temporality is not addressed in the most obvious and direct ways. One reason is that spatiality can be visualized; its features are the

result of 'seeing' and 'envisioning'. The entire Western tradition of thought, starting with Plato, is dominated by sight and ocular examples and metaphors; we come to these familiar figures of thought and truth-claims without need for explanation. Temporality, however, is auditory; its features are the result of 'hearing' and 'listening'. It comes to us as echoes, leitmotifs, a narrative line, spirals of sounds, the rhythm of a passage, remembered speech, even what Hegel called 'sounding inwardness'. It begins as the province of blind poets and epic tales, precisely the way of grasping the world classical philosophy sought to overthrow and supplant. However, as Thucydides well understood, because time-consciousness is vague, hidden, unclear, and *possibly untrue*, it requires a justification. For Simmel we need to put the question in the following way: if we know how to deploy a spatial language and construct formal properties of social interaction or *Wechselwirkung*, how can we grasp equally well a temporal language and the non-formal dynamics at work in social relationships? How do we experience time? Is consciousness of time brought about by 'lived experience' or *Erleben*, a key Simmelian concept? Does 'the temporal' mean duration, an inward unfolding, a quality of *Innerlichkeit* or 'interiority'? Is it a psychological projection and artifact of subjective consciousness? Or do we experience time as a cognitive fact of objective culture, the perceived evolution of social relationships, the onward march of social forces, or the cacaphony of modern goal-oriented 'progressive' development? Only a modernist would frame the questions in these terms. But this means that Simmel's questions are ours as well, and his answers become timely and worthy of consideration as a guide into our shared present.

The Problem of History

Unlike his colleague and friend, Max Weber, Simmel cannot be said to have worked with historical materials and topics or to have published any studies in comparative historical sociology. He was not a narrator of history *à la longue durée*, and 'development' or the evolutionary 'unfolding' of forms were not the essential categories of his mature thought, even on topics, such as the nature of the modern money economy or the institutions of capitalism, that for others would obviously have presented problems for historical investigation and comparison.

Nevertheless, Simmel's earliest work, his first unsuccessful dissertation on the 'Psychological and Ethnological Studies of Music' (1882, see Rammstedt 1989: 45–87, vol.1), was written from an evolutionary perspective. It began somewhat surprisingly with a comment by Charles Darwin to the effect that musical sounds can be considered one of the foundations for the evolution of human speech (Rammstedt, 1989: 45, vol. 1). The discussion then proceeded

along a line of reasoning derived more from Herbert Spencer than Darwin, so much so that Wilhelm Dilthey could announce years later in 1898 that Simmel's 'standpoint is the evolutionary theory of Spencer' (Köhnke, 1996: 63–77). But by the time Dilthey made his remark it was already well out of date, for just as Simmel had abandoned his study of narrative history as a young student, so as a young scholar he turned away from trendy evolutionary perspectives to a distinctive set of problems he was to make his own – problems having to do with subjectivity and subject-centered knowledge.

The question of subjectivity took a specific form: how do we structure or 'create' a text that we call 'history'? According to what presuppositions can we claim to have historical knowledge? We can never have direct perceptual access to that which has passed, as it has disappeared from our view. The 'factual' basis for our knowledge of the historical is thus always mediated by something: reports, stories, records, participant observations, traditions, memories. In Simmel's formulation the past comes to us only in 'fragments. . . more or less unreliable' that are then 'interpreted only through the experiences of the immediate present' (Simmel, 1900/1978: 112). Thus, for him in the first instance this situation presented a 'psychological' problem – that is, a problem for understanding the workings of the mind. But he came to see that 'psychology' alone could not solve problems that were essentially epistemological. The philosophy of history required minimally a methodology, if not a full-blown theory of knowledge.

The elaboration of a method for inquiry into the past occurred in the two versions of Simmel's *The Problems of the Philosophy of History* (*Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*), first issued in 1892 and completely rewritten for the second edition of 1905. In the later revision Simmel had come to recognize that the 'psychologism' of his earlier formulations, for which he was criticized, needed to be supplemented by a more critical approach to historical understanding. The new problem took a striking form: modern humanity, he claimed, is threatened with domination by two forces, nature and history, the former because it is the realm of necessity, and the later because it reduces the 'free personality' to a 'mere point of intersection for social forces woven by history' that destroy our creativity and productivity, which define the essence of our humanity. There is what we might call a tyranny of time, not in the sense (paraphrasing J. M. Keynes) that in the end history cannot matter to us because we are all dead, but in the sense that in the present 'historical laws' hold us in a vice as a supra-personal power. In Simmel's words: 'the liberation from naturalism that Kant achieved is also needed for historism [*Historismus*]. Perhaps it can succeed through the same critique of knowledge.' But we have constructed such 'laws', he notes, and therein lies the hope to master the 'spiritual being or existence [*geistige Dasein* is his untranslatable phrase] that we call history' through the self-consciousness of the sovereign, knowing subject (Rammstedt,

1989: 230, vol. 9), a formulation of the problem and its solution that surely pays a debt not just to Kant, but to Nietzsche's famous reflections on 'The Use and Abuse of History'.

What emerges from this effort to defeat historism and its alleged iron-clad laws and to restore authority to the creative subject? At the level of a theory about historical knowledge, Simmel's targets were not simply historism in general, but more particularly both historical realism and theories of historical necessity. The former is best represented by Ranke's stated aim to capture the past 'as it actually was' (*'wie es wirklich gewesen ist'* (Rammstedt, 1989: 418, vol. 9; p. 303, vol. 15)), for Simmel an obvious impossibility, and the latter by Hegelian notions of progressive dialectics as restated in Marx's 'historical materialism'. Simmel's contrasting position might be described broadly as nominalist and skeptical, because of his carefully and sharply drawn distinction between a 'lived reality' that is now in the past and the concepts, categories and types that must be employed in any effort to recover that past and construct 'causal explanations' of it.

Simmel wrote little about the logic of 'ideal type' constructs, as championed by his colleague, Max Weber. But, like Weber, he did have a conception of the kind of 'understanding' or *verstehen* that is a presupposition for all historical knowledge. Understanding required for Simmel a preparation in the observing subject's mind for a kind of imitation or reconstruction (*Nachbildung* is his term), which might be understood as a psychological process of deliberative reflection. However, he pointed out that interpretative understanding could be used in two ways: first, to make sense of the contents of statements or 'actions', such as Newton's laws of gravity or Goethe's verses, which he thought would yield 'timeless' knowledge, that is, knowledge whose validity was not conditioned by temporality. Second, it could be used to inquire into the same sorts of cultural products, but with the aim of 'understanding' motivations, origins, influences and other human interactions that helped create the product, resulting in knowledge that Simmel considered temporally specific and contextually bounded. Both could produce intersubjectively 'valid' knowledge. But the 'riddle of historical knowledge', as he called it, is that claims to 'objective' knowledge of both kinds could only emerge from the process of subjective understanding (pp. 261–7, vol. 9).

From these positions Simmel did not conclude that history can never have a rational meaning, but rather that the 'meanings' attached to historical sequences defined as an 'historical totality' in *his* sense, citing the later phrasing in 'The Problem of Historical Time' of 1916, are constructed from specific points of view and for particular human purposes. Contemporary narratives about 'technological progress' or perceived 'advances' in medical science are obvious examples. In such narratives 'time' becomes a category of historical knowledge. More specifically, for Simmel the concept of time should be thought of as 'only

a relation of the contents of history with each other' (p. 292, vol. 15). As a consequence, if we describe the contents of human affairs relationally, then we view them under the aspect of *Verzeitlichung*, an untranslatable process-term for what we might call a temporal and diachronic perspective on the world that leaves rational meaning open to specification.

For Hegel the apposite notion was 'historicity'. Considering his Kantian point of departure, Simmel was fully aware of the contrast, as well as the attractions in thought of dialectical synthesis. He was actually not averse to using Hegelian metaphors and logic too, such as his favorite tracing of the upward spiral. But such devices were merely convenient figures for thought. They should not be mistaken for mirror-like reflections or images of the phenomenal world. On the contrary, for Simmel the task of the historical consciousness was not to construct a unified and seamless totality, which could only be provisional in any case, but to make sense cognitively of the contradictions, the oppositions, and the 'autonomous dynamic' or 'internal logic' or 'lawfulness' of social forms (*Eigendynamik* and *Eigengesetzlichkeit* are his terms). He believed this was especially so in the modern world because of its plurality, diversity, fragmentation, and collapsing of spatial forms and acceleration of temporal relationships.

From History to Lebensphilosophie

This conclusion is rendered both more specific and more complex by his later turn from problems established by Kantian philosophy to the fin-de-siècle 'philosophy of life' or *Lebensphilosophie*, as it was called, and his elaboration from a different perspective of the distinction between the two types of understanding. In the important essay on Henri Bergson, *the* contemporary post-Kantian philosopher of time, Simmel (Rammstedt, 1989: 53–69, vol. 13) emphasized that our understanding actually confronts two 'time schema': simplifying somewhat, he called one 'mechanistic', and the other 'organic'. According to the mechanistic view, time is conceived as calculable and measurable, discontinuous, and reversible. It is the familiar unilinear time of clocks, instruments of measurement and controlled experiments, thus also the province of causal, nomothetic science, whether Newtonian or Darwinian. On the other hand, according to the organic view, time is conceived as unpredictable and incalculable, continuous, and irreversible. It is the province of human life as it is experienced and renewed, in which time has a 'passage' and seems to be overdetermined, because as Simmel puts it, 'each present presupposes the entire past' (p. 58, vol. 13).

For Simmel the most important question was: how are the two schema for time related? He interpreted Bergson's originality to consist in an effort to

derive the former from the latter, to deduce the clear and distinct certainties of science from an absolute and universal 'life force' or 'drive' (*Trieb*) that seeks to grasp phenomena for pragmatic and, one might say, 'life-enhancing' purposes. According to this vitalist conception of 'life', every moment in the passage of time is already different from what it was previously, a view that Simmel had expounded independently of Bergson. This must be so because 'life' participates in the process of 'continuous becoming', the *durée* that paradoxically is a fixed feature of the world, a presupposition for all stability and permanence, and thus a condition for science itself. Simmel states the idea in an unusual way, noting with approval that for Bergson,

> Our logic is almost entirely the logic of fixed bodies. It is based essentially, as with any mechanism, on the basic concepts of identity and difference [*Anderssein*, or literally 'other being']. But precisely for the human condition or the condition of the soul [*seelischer Zustand*] these concepts. . . are canceled completely. The opposition of identity and difference disappears in the continuity of self-transformation [*Sichändern*]. (p. 62, vol. 13)

Restated in simplified language, what Simmel means to say in these opaque sentences, almost immune to translation, is that the passage of life in 'organic time', which is the subject of historical understanding, consists in flux and transformation. What is transformed, abstractly stated, is the relationship between identity and difference, or between what post-Simmelian thought would call 'being' and 'nothingness'. The modernist penchant so characteristic of Simmel for using words like 'heightening', 'striving' or 'deepening' conveys just such an outlook. Such words give us access to the reality of 'self-transformation', which is 'life' itself, and in the absence of which the world as we know it would cease to exist.

Now the way Simmel constructs these dualisms has implications for his social thought. Most famously, in his discussions of woman and the women's movement, temporality can be 'engendered' so as to align woman and 'female culture' with the enduring qualities of 'organic' life and 'being', while the objectified public culture created by male accomplishment can be said to exemplify striving and transformation. This is explicitly Simmel's argument, and it is one based on assumptions about gender difference – assumptions that give rise to the entire problematic of 'female culture': how can women contribute to, alter, or even replace the existing 'male culture'? It is only on this conceptual platform that Simmel (1911/1984) can erect his most radical conclusions:

> From the standpoint of cultural history consider the extreme point that the ideal of the independence and equality of women seems to be capable of reaching: an objective female culture parallel to the male and thereby annulling its brutal historical idealization. . . the female form of existence would present itself as a

> different form, autonomous on the basis of its ultimate essence, incommensurable on the basis of the standard of the male principle, and with contents that are not formed in the same way. Thus its meaning would no longer turn on an equivalence *within* the general form of objective culture but rather on an equivalence between two modes of existence that have a completely different rhythm. One is dualistic, oriented to becoming, knowledge, and volition. As a result, it objectifies the contents of its life out of the process of life in the form of a cultural world. The other lies beyond this subjectively constituted and objectively developed dichotomy. For this reason, the contents of its life are not experienced in a form that is external to them. On the contrary, it must search out a perfection that is immanent to them. (pp. 100–1)

In other words, temporality may be experienced in two radically different ways by 'man' caught within the diremptions of becoming and 'woman' lifted beyond all dualisms. This is a brilliant self-criticism by Simmel of his own categories and assumptions. However, it is a fictional projection 'beyond history', a philosophical bookend to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*. Furthermore, the problem of subjectivity has now been restated. To see why that is the case we need to consider Simmel's unusual approach to the aesthetics of modern life, as well as the modes of analysis in his mature sociology and theory of culture.

Towards a Sociology of Modern Life

It was in the fin-de-siècle journal *Jugend*, the modernist publication which gave an identity to the new style of *Jugendstil* (or elsewhere *art nouveau*), that Simmel's way of thinking about modern life began to assume a distinctive quality. Among his many occasional pieces in the journal, eight carried the title 'Snapshots *sub specie aeternitatis*', or more literally 'Pictures of the Moment Under the Aspect of Eternity' which arrested the passage of time and held up a specific notion, object, action or occurrence for close, detailed inspection and comment. These were enigmatic commentaries, playing upon Spinoza's expression for capturing in philosophical reflection all objects or things 'purely according to their inner necessity and significance, separated from the contingency of the here and now' (Rammstedt, 1989: 96, vol. 5), as Simmel described his intention. In other words, they sought to capture that which is universally and eternally true, without reference to temporality or dependence upon merely temporal categories. Simmel had a number of contemporary aesthetic models in mind, such as Böcklin's landscape paintings that were celebrated by the *avant garde*. But in addition he had an interest in the problem of 'framing', both in the art of drawing and painting, and in the contemporary use of innovative techniques in photography and film. The 'snapshot' image, of course, was

drawn from the vocabulary of photography, in this case suggesting a 'freezing of the frame' for close inspection.

The most striking aspect of these experimental contributions is the way they frame topics having to do with the dialectic of permanence and change, and thus with fate, fatality, emotional passage, coming into appearance and disappearing, and the life-process Simmel called the 'movement of the soul'. The topics are modernist, elusive, marginal, and ambiguous in translation: heightening (*Steigerung*), sequencing, renunciation, coming to a stop, traces, animation, bad faith, humans as the *anima candida* – all fall under Simmel's gaze (Simmel, 1899–1903). They take up famous conundrums of the eternal, such as Sophocles' passage in *Oedipus at Colonus*: 'best of all, is not to be born', comprehensive and frightening in its finality. In addition, these reflections also preview Simmel's own sociological investigations by sketching the dynamics of interactions like coquetry, faithlessness, revenge, making excuses, or the human implications of 'money'.

But there is a paradox in the exercise of intellect *sub specie aeternitatis*, once noted by Hannah Arendt (1958): 'no matter how concerned a thinker may be with eternity, the moment he sits down to write his thoughts he ceases to be concerned primarily with eternity and shifts his attention to leaving some trace of them. He has entered the *vita activa* and chosen its way of permanence and potential immortality' (p. 20). And so it was with Simmel: although he had an intense desire to grasp that which is eternally true, he was above all a writer who craved originality and a reputation for the ages. The paradox was addressed, as best it could be, through his effort to extract from perceptions of the immediate, particular and transient things of the world general notions that could be inscribed on the page away from the specific sites of their origins. But the things of the modern world were not simply transitory, but fragmented, dispersed, overwhelming in quantity and variety, and increasingly beyond human comprehension. The question thus became: how then can they be grasped in a way that is authoritative and meaningful? For Simmel the answer led away from the experimental essay to the science of sociology. Indeed, the effort to find an answer accounts for his turn to the new science of sociology in the first place, becoming one of its earliest and most important founders.

Simmel's mature sociology was built on two fundamental categories of social action: 'interaction' (*Wechselwirkung*) and 'experience' or 'lived experience' (*Erleben*). In one of his rare (and incomplete) autobiographical statements, he provided a brief account of his initial perception of the importance of the concept of 'interaction', or, as the word suggests, action that has 'reciprocal effects', and its rationale as the key term for his thinking and his social analysis:

> The temporal dissolution of everything substantial, absolute and eternal into the flow of things, into historical mutability, into merely psychological reality, seems

> to me assured against a groundless subjectivism and skepticism, only if one replaces those substantially solid values with the living interactions of elements, which in turn are subject to the same dissolution into the infinite. The central concepts of truth, value, objectivity and so on arose for me as interactions, as contents of a relativism, which now no longer means the skeptical loosening of all solidities, but precisely the assurance against this by means of a new concept of solidity. (Gassen and Landmann, 1993: 9; see also Rammstedt, 1991: 136)

It is revealing that the starting point for Simmel was still the old problem of subjectivity, and failing a solution to it, an effort to combat the inevitable charges of relativism. He thought a sociology constructed around interaction provided grounds for a new substantiality, but at a different level of analysis: not a philosophy of internal relations among abstractions, such as 'truth' and 'value', but a science of sociation (*Vergesellschaftung*), of the formation of *social relations* among interacting units: individuals, groups, clans, nations – associational processes of all types, from a microscopic to a macroscopic scale. But what does an approach to social life using interaction as the common unit of analysis really entail?

It is a widely held view that interaction is a formal and atemporal category, to be used as a kind of mathematical formula or as an exercise in social geometry. But this view is incomplete and misleading, for it misses the other essential dimension to Simmel's conceptualization of social action: 'lived experience' or *Erleben*. This kind of experience is not 'book learning' or the sort of superficial knowing that is mediated by devices external to the self (which would be *Erfahrung* in Simmel's terminology), but instead experience that becomes part of the individual through participation in social institutions. When we are affected by our social environment and social circumstances we experience the effect as cumulative action on the self: the experience has intensity, weight, depth, longevity. It is internalized as lived experience.

Simmel insists that sociology must work from the perspective both of 'interaction' and of 'lived experience'. The former specifies the way in which individuals create social structures and institutions; the latter reverses the perspective and specifies the way those structures and institutions shape the individual. In the summation of one student of Simmel's sociology: 'interaction refers to processes of externalization and objectification of social activity; experience refers to processes of internalization, that is, processes in which individuals integrate the effects of the objective social structure into their personality' (Nedelmann, 1990a: 227). Both are processes that operate through time, that have a past and a future, that can be assessed in terms of temporal categories, such as 'degree of integration'. Such uses of the concepts become quite obvious when one thinks of processes like socialization, internalization of group norms, institutionalization of a practice, or the routinization of charisma. In short, interaction and lived experience provide the connection between the

individual and *social* time, that is, the sense of time not as internal time-consciousness, but as the onward flow of social life, a view expounded with unusual perspicacity in his analyses of the money economy and the nature of aesthetic modernity.

Money and the Dynamics of Culture

The popular worldly philosopher of the capitalist spirit, Benjamin Franklin, announced that 'time is money', and, to illustrate his point, penned lines of advice to ambitious youth. While accepting the observation, Simmel would no doubt have added that money is time as well. Max Weber chose Franklin to illustrate the 'spirit of capitalism', but Simmel (1900/1978) instead relied on Sebastian Franck, regarding him as 'the first to recognize the revolutionary significance of money' and to call 'time an expensive commodity' (p. 506). Simmel's key analysis of such matters was, of course, his lengthy and substantial treatise of 1900, *The Philosophy of Money*, a remarkable tour de force on the modern economy. It is arguably his single most important work, attracting a lion's share of recent critical attention (Kintzelé and Schneider, 1993; Rammstedt, 2003).

The essential reason for its importance lies in the fact that Simmel used the occasion to expound and synthesize many of his major themes, including the notion of constructing a 'new storey' of 'psychological preconditions' beneath historical materialism, and using the details, minutiae and fragments of life to assemble a general interpretation of large-scale phenomena – in his words, 'finding in each of life's details the totality of its meaning' (Simmel, 1900/1978: 55). At the center of these phenomena lay the problem of money itself, and the emphasis it introduced on rational calculation, quantification, time-keeping, punctuality, exactness, circulation, exchange, movement, flow. Simmel suggested that under its impersonal influence quantity was changed into quality, time and space became compressed, and the world itself was transformed into 'a huge arithmetical problem' (p. 444).

Culture was also transformed. Those features of the world Simmel called 'objective culture' – the things, objects, products and processes 'that determine and surround our lives, such as tools, means of transport, the products of science, technology and art' (p. 448) – have now become more refined, extensive and dominant. In contrast, individual or 'subjective culture' starts to fall behind or decrease, in two senses: the individual mind can no longer grasp the nature of the objects and processes that make up everyday life, and for the individual it becomes more and more impossible to keep up, to take in and enrich the mind and personality with the ever-expanding contents of a dynamic and seductive objective culture. Over time, the individual's share pales to

insignificance. Thus, for the money economy and the modern world we must speak of an increase or intensification (*Steigerung* is again Simmel's modernist term) in objective culture, and simultaneously a decrease in subjective culture.

The problem of subjectivity has now taken a new form: in the modern age it is for Simmel the discrepancy and tension between objective and subjective culture 'which forms our specific problem' (p. 450). This 'specific problem' can be restated from particular perspectives: for example, in his famous essay on the city and its effect on the 'life of the spirit' the question becomes: how can we maintain our autonomy and individuality in the face of the overwhelming presence of the dynamic, differentiated, sensuous 'objective culture' brought to perfection in the modern metropolis (Simmel, 1971: 324–5)? Such questioning affects all his subsequent writing, and it is especially evident in the well-known essays on fashion or style, and on the 'conflict' in modern culture.

How does Simmel address the problem he has formulated? The basic argument is stated already in the third chapter on 'money in the sequence of purposes' in the *Philosophy of Money*: money is 'teleological', he claims, in the sense that it is a mere 'means' that becomes an absolute value, an 'end in itself', an unquestioned absolute purpose. Money's 'teleological position' thus makes it

> . . . a symbol in which the major regulators of practical life are frozen. We are supposed to treat life as if each of its moments were a final purpose; every moment is supposed to be taken to be so important as if life existed for its sake. At the same time, we are supposed to live as if none of its moments were final, as if our sense of value did not stop with any moment and each should be a transitional point and a means to higher and higher stages. (p. 232)

This contradictory double demand and its implications are then illustrated sociologically in the book's last chapter on the 'style of life' in modern culture. The perfect institutional embodiment is the stock and commodity exchange, where time is radically compressed and 'values', in Simmel's words, are 'rushed through the greatest number of hands in the shortest possible time'. The human activity of the exchange is emblematic of the larger social trend, namely 'an extreme acceleration in the pace of life, a feverish commotion and compression of its fluctuations, in which the specific influence of money upon the course of psychological life becomes most clearly discernible' (p. 506).

Thus, the accelerating pace of life and the consequent distortions in our sense of time have psychological and sociological consequences. They generate opposition, resistance, adaptation, and social forms and strategies for individuals and groups to cope with money's real and symbolic power and the overwhelming force of objective culture. Simmel delineates the forms of resistance in different ways and in different texts, but in every case it is a matter of 'lived experience' and the internalization of social forces, creating human types and attributes of

character that become articulated, and then evolve, shift, and replace each other over time. To describe these attributes as mere ‘attitudes’ is misleading; they are characterological and represent an *ethos* for the conduct of life. Avarice, extravagance, asceticism, indifference, cynicism, stylishness, ‘being different’, adventurousness, playfulness, religiosity – all can be understood from this perspective, Simmel claims. They identify social roles that are, in a sense, interchangeable. But attachment to them can also become defensive and obsessive. The list of corresponding social types can be long indeed: the miser, spendthrift, ascetic, cynic, blasé person, *flâneur*, dandy, trickster, celebrity, activist, spiritualist, ideologue. For Simmel (1971) even sociability itself, the ‘play form’ of sociation, can function as a flight from a modern life ‘overburdened with objective content and material demands’ (p. 133).

To understand Simmel’s analysis it is important to emphasize that these are *social* types, and through interaction they create new cultural sites for socialization, group identity, and social and political movements, such as feminism or the ecological and ‘life reform’ movements of the fin de siècle. Similar present-day examples are obvious and numerous. Most importantly, they all represent the effort by groups and individuals to arrest, obstruct, impede, accelerate, or (as the *au courant* phrase has it) ‘go with the flow’ of modern time.

Modernity as the Eternal Present

The past, historicity, and the experience of time become a problem for the modern individual. Simmel senses the changed circumstances and the break with tradition, for in writing about modern social life and aesthetic modernity he no longer assumes historicity and the historical consciousness of the nineteenth century, associated so strongly with Hegelian and Darwinian world-views. Instead, he assumes a loss of continuity, a breakdown in received traditions, enjoyment of forgetfulness, fixation on the present moment and absorption into the experience of pure motion. The dominion of presentism – erasure of the past, effacement of inherited connections, domination by the immediately visible sublime – is an integral part of modernity, an essential feature of ‘lived experience’ under modern conditions.

Nowhere is the rupture more apparent than in Simmel’s essays on fashion, style, modern art and modern artists. Consider, for example, his assessment of Rodin’s achievement in the most traditional, resistant and time-bound of artistic media:

> Until Rodin, timelessness in the plastic arts appeared achievable only if one gave the object or content of the work of art the character of calmness, substantiality and permanence. One thought that mastery over temporal coming-into-being and disappearance could only be attained through continuity or persistence in time.

> Rodin was the first in principle to discover the timelessness in art of pure movement. (Rammstedt, 1989: 340, vol. 14)

This conclusion about the modern accomplishment of freeing the 'pure movement' latent in a given 'form' is elaborated further, a reflection linguistically in the Latin vocabularies of the close connection between motion and *e*motion:

> In antiquity sculpture sought the logic of the body, so to speak, whereas Rodin sought its psychology. For the essence of the modern as such is psychologism, the experiencing [*Erleben*] and interpretation of the world in terms of the reactions of our inner life, and indeed as an inner world, the dissolution of fixed contents in the fluid element of the soul, from which all that is substantive is filtered and whose forms are merely forms of movement. Therefore music, the most moving and animated [*bewegteste*] of all the arts, is the most modern art; and thus lyric poetry, most expressive of the longing of its times, was constructed on the basis of music. For this reason the specifically modern achievement of painting is landscape, which is an *état d'âme*, and whose characteristics of color and detail avoid a fixed logical structure, more so than the body and figural composition. (p. 346, vol. 14; Frisby, 1992: 66)

While writing this passage Simmel could have had in mind Mahler's symphonies, Strauss's tone poems, or the canvasses of *Die Brücke* and *Der blaue Reiter*, painters whose work achieved the modern idiom of expression and movement through color and the fusion and immersion of human figures *en plein air*. The aesthetic culture of his fin de siècle provided ample evidence for the 'timelessness of modernity' (Lichtblau, 1997: 128–41; Kim, 2002: 284–314).

Aesthetic culture also provided Simmel with a definition of modernity in terms of his sociological categories: its essential property is the 'lived experience' of the dissolution of form, the internalization of the objective culture of 'pure movement' that modern art conveys so well. Moreover, the experience of dissolution of form or pure movement, to stay with Simmel's terminology, is found not only in art, but in social relations and institutions as well. Modernity, in other words, has two aspects: aesthetic and social. They are not qualitatively different, however. On the contrary, each complements and reinforces the other.

Nowhere is this complementarity more obvious than in Simmel's (1971) innovative analysis of *die Mode*, that is, fashion or style (pp. 294–323). In his view the social appropriation of style is the perfect instrument of compensation for loss of historicity. It is imitative and transitory. It mediates between adaptation and differentiation, inclusion and exclusion, familiarity and strangeness, combination and isolation. It relies on modern means of communication and production, and is instantaneously transportable and replicable. It circulates through every sphere of interaction – in art, politics, economics, religion, entertainment, sexuality, work, everyday life. Its immediacy makes it the essence of presentism: once embraced, it is already 'out of style'; once invented, it must be

reinvented; once discarded, it can be rediscovered. The perfect analogy is the merry-go-round (Nedelmann, 1990b), the closed circle of repetitive motion, the spinning wheel of fashion in which the new becomes old, the old new, and movement produces only a return to the point of origin.

These illustrations are sufficient to establish Simmel's claims. But the question is: why should modernity conceived as a striving for 'timelessness' pose such a challenge? Even if Simmel is correct, and all modern form is motion, movement, a dissolution of form, even *formlessness itself*, then in what sense can this radically new circumstance be considered a problem?

If we read Simmel critically, modernity in its double aspect can be thought of as presenting three basic challenges to humanity's experience of time and relationship to the past: first, attachment to the 'organic' time-schema is broken. Each present no longer presupposes the entire past, but instead is caught in endlessly repetitive Bergsonian *durée*. Stated somewhat differently and more dramatically, the conditions of life given in nature, natality and mortality, become subject to manipulation, redefinition, and human engineering. Using Simmel's conceptualizations, it is as if the 'mechanical' time-schema has freed itself from its 'organic' bonds. Second, in the absence of a temporal anchor and orientation, the 'anything goes' of style and acquisition takes over. But since style and acquisition are insubstantial and meaningless, the modern response is to 'invent' meanings, no matter how bizarre, tendentious, or self-destructive. Nietzsche anticipated this state of affairs when he remarked that we would rather 'will nothingness' than not will at all. Third, with presentism as the lens onto the world, 'history' becomes intertwined with 'memory' and its psychological uncertainties, inventions and denials (Jedlowski, 1990; LaCapra, 1998: 16–25). Reconstructing the past is then linked to problems of authenticity and the quest for identity. One could say this in turn presents us with precisely the kind of 'psychologism' – the world interpreted 'in terms of the reactions of our inner life' – whose implications Simmel foresaw and began to chart in his own time.

Never at a loss for perspectives, Simmel did not let these critical observations about 'timeless' modernity rest here, however. For notwithstanding recognition of the new problematic, his own fully developed view of modernity, aesthetic and social, was that of the enthusiast. We should not forget his attachment to modern spaces, sounds and tempos. Simmel was always and primarily a celebrant of the urban scene, the laboratory for his science, the place of social possibilities and individual freedoms. He understood the allure of freedom from the past and its burdens, and the relief of escaping from a 'past that will not pass'. Reflecting on his own passage, Simmel once remarked that 'Berlin's development from a city to a metropolis in the years around and after the turn of the century coincides with my own strongest and extensive development' (Frisby, 1992: 19). The rhythms of the metropolis became part of Simmel, his

modernist mode of thought, his science of interaction and lived experience, and his cultural sociology. Loving one's native city as one loves one's soul, recalling Machiavelli's old line, is a modern attachment he would have understood and could have called his own.

Conclusion: Thoughts in Season

In important ways Simmel was an untimely thinker, an outsider never fully accepted in his own time, devotee of philosophy, creator of the new and controversial science of sociology, proponent of the experimental essay, investigator of apparently marginal subject matter, pioneer of novel subjects and perspectives. The result was highly original work, a popular following among uprooted urban students, and little in the way of successors. In the 1930s, for example, of all the major social theorists of the age, only Simmel was missing from the pages of Talcott Parsons's *The Structure of Social Action* (circa 1935), a remarkable omission in a book aiming to systematize the most important social theory concerned with social action from the early decades of the twentieth century. Parsons's views were representative, his unpublished chapter concluding that Simmel had failed to develop an 'explicit methodological foundation' or a 'systematic. . . theory on its basis', thus giving his sociology 'the form of a series of brilliant but disconnected essays on what purported to be specific social forms. They are full of suggestions and insight, many of them first-rate contributions, but they are of relatively little help for our purposes' (p. 5). The twin charges of 'formalism' and 'dilettantism' had taken a toll, notwithstanding Simmel's influential English-language publications, a total of nine before 1910 translated by Albion Small for *The American Journal of Sociology*, and his positive reception by early American social science.

Yet today Simmel has become timely (Handel, 2003: 246–64). The reasons have to do not so much with improved understanding of his formal sociology or the innovative chapters dealing with important current topics, such as social conflict or the clandestine conspiratorial group, though these discussions do merit renewed attention. Instead, we are drawn to Simmel because of his cultural sociology and his insightful reflections on the 'modern' and 'postmodern' condition, terms Simmel himself declined to separate. Simmel is postmodern *avant le lettre* in his mode of thought, combination of philosophical reflection with sociological investigation, concern with the fragmentary and marginal, critique of 'foundational' epistemologies, emphasis on the cultural and the psychological, and perceptions about our 'eternal present'. It is as if the *Zeitgeist* has rediscovered in Simmel its own preoccupations. He is no longer the 'formal sociologist', but has instead become the modern social theorist of time and temporality.

In the last analysis, however, has Simmel solved the problem of subjectivity? We cannot say that subjectivity admits a 'solution' in the sense that it has been laid to rest, never to reappear. But as a social theorist Simmel has accomplished something more important: he has redefined the problem for modern life, given it clarity, and shown how in practice it can be 'answered' and acted upon through interaction and lived experience. What remains after that is not his affair. He has left the rest with us.

Notes

1. Such citations in the text refer to Simmel's complete works edited by O. Rammstedt (1989).To date 18 of the projected 24 volumes have been published. All translations from this edition are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

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