Dissonância
revista de teoria crítica

ISSN: 2594-5025
Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas
Universidade Estadual de Campinas
www.ifch.unicamp.br/ojs/index.php/teoriacritica

Título	The ambivalence of indifference in modern society
Autor/a	Georg Lohmann
Tradutor/a	
Fonte	*Dissonância: Revista de Teoria Crítica*, v.2 n.2, Dossiê Marx & Simmel, 2º semestre de 2018, pp. 23-55
Link	https://www.ifch.unicamp.br/ojs/index.php/teoriacritica/workflow/index/3824

Formato de citação sugerido:

LOHMANN, Georg. "The ambivalence of indifference in modern society". *Dissonância: Revista de Teoria Crítica*, v.2 n.2, 2º semestre de 2018, pp. 23-55.

THE AMBIVALENCE OF INDIFFERENCE IN MODERN SOCIETY

Marx and Simmel

Georg Lohmann[1]

1. Introduction[2]

Marx's and Simmel's efforts toward a diagnosis of the situation of modern society are focused on the experience of man's estrangement from the world, from himself and from others. To that extent, both belong to the tradition of theories of modernity which, since Rousseau and Hegel, criticize modern society for various phenomena of "alienation". What makes them particularly interesting for us today, in spite of their obviously different theoretical approaches, are the ambivalences with which they try to criticize and evaluate these phenomena. Both develop different theoretical concepts first to describe these phenomena, and secondly to evaluate them.

---

[1] Professor Emeritus of Practical Philosophy, Otto von Guericke Universität Magdeburg, Germany. E-mail address: georg.lohmann@ovgu.de.

[2] This is a revised version of G. Lohmann, "The ambivalence of indifference in modern society: Marx and Simmel". In: *Individuality and Modernity: Georg Simmel and Modern Culture* (ed. L.W. Isaksen, M. Waerness). Bergen: Sociology Press Bergen, 1993, p. 41-60, 140-142.

In the history of Marx's theory these concepts are stressed differently. Obviously Simmel avails himself of Marx's diagnosis, according to which capitalist society is characterized by the tension between "personal independence" and "objective dependence" (Marx 1953: 75), and in his *Philosophy of Money* the concept of indifference is to be seen as a generalized and cultural reinterpretation of what Marx called "alienation". It is well known that Georg Lukács, a student of Simmel's, reads Simmel's social diagnosis back into Marx's theory by developing his famous "theory of reification" (Verdinglichung). In so doing, Lukács amalgamates a generalized theory of reification with Marx's theory of class conflict. Such an amalgamation leads to numerous dilemmas, which I will leave aside here (Lohmann 1983). In the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, starting with Adorno's critique of reification and continuing to some aspects of Habermas's concept of the colonization of the life-world, what was meant by alienation, reification and indifference plays an important role in the critique of modernity. To clarify this critical approach I think one has to distinguish between alienation (*Entfremdung*), reification (*Verdinglichung*) or/and objectification (*Versachlichung*) and becoming indifferent (*Vergleichgültigung*). In this order, the first mentioned concept implies stronger presuppositions than the following one. I think really the last one, the concept of indifference, is most proper to show the ambivalence of a critique of modernity.

In the first part of my paper I will briefly examine these categories and give a very short sketch of how Marx deals with this problem; I will then show how Simmel develops a descrip-

tion of indifference in modern society and how he tries to solve the problem of its ambivalence. For both of them, phenomena of indifference are the most fundamental properties of modernity.

2. Indifference as object and opponent in Marx's Critique of Capital

Marx not only criticized the increasing indifference of human relations under capitalist conditions, he also affirmed such indifference in important respects. This ambivalence was hidden so long as he used strong concepts like alienation to describe and to evaluate capitalist society, but its presence becomes obvious to us in his main work *Das Kapital*, in which he used weaker concepts like "objectification", reification and indifference.

For Marx, alienation refers to Rousseau's *aliénation* and to Hegel's ambiguous use of the term in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Therefore the concept of alienation implies a circular movement of first externalizing and then appropriating (*Entäußerung und Aneignung*) one's own talents or capacities. Alienation means that appropriation is hindered while externalization still goes on. But what is crucial for our considerations is that something can estrange itself, and then alienate itself from man, only if it is essentially proper to him and/or if he could make it proper to him, that is appropriate it (Theunissen 1984: 104f).[3] A critique of alienation must therefore rely upon supposi-

[3] For a detailed and critical revision of Marx's theory of alienation, see now Lohmann 2018a.

tions about what is proper to man. Such a critique necessarily proceeds from strong premises regarding the determination of man. In the *Paris Manuscripts*, Marx characterizes the (anthropological) determination of man as his self-realization and self-fulfillment, which are prevented by the structures of the capitalist mode of production and the effects of private property; therefore, when Marx describes something as alienation, it is already clear that he evaluates it in a negative way.

The concept of *reification* involves weaker premises, inasmuch as it refers to a difference in categorical type: something is seen or treated as a real object or takes on the appearance of a relationship between such objects. The concept of *objectification* also refers to an objective and neutral attitude towards real objects.[4] Thus one can easily distinguish a descriptive from a normative use of these terms. One can criticize cases of reification (and objectification) by showing that the phenomena involved are improperly treated in this way – i.e. by pointing out a category error.

In our context, there are two basic meanings that are important for the concept of *indifference*. It refers first to a state in which two items, placed in relationship to one another, become equivalent (in-different) in a certain respect. In such instances of indifference the two items become functionally equivalent and replaceable. One can speak here of functional

[4] Beyond it one can distinguish between *Verdinglichung* und *Versachlichung*, because there is for Hegel and for Marx a difference between *Sache* and *Ding*, see Ritter 1977: 268f.

indifference, and the main examples are the levelling effects of exchange and money for different goods.

The second basic meaning of indifference refers to a modification of personal attitudes toward states of affairs, as a result of which a person behaves in a disinterested or neutral manner toward states of affairs, persons and social relationships. Such forms of indifference contain both volitional and affective components. This meaning refers to the Latin *indifferentia* as the translation of the Greek *adiaphora*, which means that something is morally or ethically neutral, that it is neither good nor bad. One can speak here of personal indifference, which can be aimed at other persons or against the individual itself.

In contradistinction to his analysis of alienation in his early writings, Marx develops in his work *Das Kapital* a particular thesis concerning the connection between functional and personal indifference.[5] They are fundamental to the structural processes of capital, and such phenomena constitute the object of Marx's critique and yet at the same time one of its central problems. As a rule, the effects of such processes seem to manifest positive as well as negative aspects, so that an evaluation can occur only after careful consideration and only with reference to certain normative suppositions. The emotions play a special role here, because they, in a sense, reveal the value of forms of personal indifference without entailing a final judgment.

I will now give a rough explanation of my interpretation of Marx so that one can see later the differences and similarities

[5] To this interpretation see Lohmann 1991.

between Marx and Simmel. The starting point of Marx's critical description of capital is the *immanent criticism* of the theory of natural rights, which determines the self-image of the bourgeois-capitalist society, as well as of the theories of classical political economy. The evaluation of certain self-contradictions then leads to a criticism *transcending* the limits of theories of natural rights. The normative content of the historiographic passages in *Capital* contains the most interesting version of the latter form of criticism. Such passages narratively describe the ways of life and demands of wage-laborers and show their battles and defeats in the struggle against a complete domination of their life by capital.[6] I would now like to add to this understanding of the method of Marx's critique some remarks concerning its content.[7]

From the point of view of an internal criticism, Marx identifies, in the form of the labor theory of value, relationships of abstraction as determining the capitalist sphere of production. I interpret such relationships as a complex of *basic indifferences* with respect to the materials involved in the work-process, with respect to the concrete forms and modes of work, with respect to the specific goals of work and with respect to all qualitative individuality. Through the determination of value these basic indifferences place specific demands on the capitalist work-process. They characterize the relationships of man to both the world and the self in capitalist society in as much as he is defined by his work.

---

[6] See Lohmann 1986, Lohmann 1991, and now Lohmann 2018b.

[7] See for more detailed interpretations Lohmann 1991.

One must distinguish the aforementioned types of indifference from relationships of indifferences defined by forms of socialization. Such *medial indifferences* relate to the exchange of commodities and the transfer of money, which constitute the predominant form of socialization; they include certain interrelated types of disinterest of people in one another and in their universal social concerns. Marx saw manifestations of such kinds of indifference in the atomistic behavior of private owners in bourgeois society and their mutual estrangement, in the fetishism of commodities and of money, in the abstract nature of legal rights and in the objectification of social life-styles.

Both basic and medial indifferences presuppose and cause certain changes in the self-referential relationships of both the persons involved and the system. The relationships of capitalists and wage-laborers to themselves as well as the reproduction processes of capital reflect such changes. In the former case one can speak of *individual forms of indifference*, which relate to disinterest in oneself as a person and in essential aspects of individuality. In the latter case one can speak of *systemic indifference* because the self-referential processing of capital comprises a system indifferent to its individual parts or sub-systems and to its surroundings. The extreme stability of the system of capital, which Marx surely underestimates in his theory of cyclical crises, relates very closely to systemic indifference. The "reification of social relationships" describes this phenomenon in much too harmless a way. It is also related to processes of modernization in which human beings are liberated from domination due to class and tradition or to personal relationships. Marx sees as

positive those forms of objectification which lead to partial freedom, which cause the "evaporation" of relationships of class and which eliminate social bondage (1953: 139, 365). Relationships of indifference can emancipate the individual from "natural" or traditional relationships in that they destroy "first nature" and replace it with a "second nature". Marx, in agreement with Hegel, sees the positive side of bourgeois abstraction in its liquidation of the path to pre-modern "idyllic" relationships (Theunissen 1982a: 379). But that which appears positive from the standpoint of a fully developed capitalist society means for the individuals actually involved a destruction of their world. The chapter on manufacture, in which Marx treats such problems systematically, accordingly evaluates such destruction from the view of those involved as negative. At the same time, however, Marx assumes the rational perspective of his own time and comes to a positive assessment of this destruction and of the decline of traditional ways of life due to the need for developing universal social productivity.

Marx again adopts this rational perspective as he describes the advances of civilization effected by capital and when he praises the increased discipline and output demanded of the wage-laborer in the capitalist sphere of production. Here, too, the craftsmanship and practical skills of workers, who had derived their sense of personal worth precisely from these capabilities, "evaporate" with the new productivity of a scientifically organized industrial sector.

But there is a fundamental theoretical ambivalence especially with respect to individual indifference. Although Marx, in

general, assesses individual indifferences as negative, particularly when analyzed with regard to the self-determination of the wage-laborer and his situation, he also sees positive aspects of individual indifference. The morally neutral attitude of the capitalist to others and himself is a precondition of his rationality, and it is also a precondition of the productivity of capital. At first glance, Marx is not criticizing this moral indifference for moral reasons, he is merely criticizing the wrong use of it because it leads to class domination.[8] Marx assesses relationships of indifference as negative where he can show them to be *masked relationships of domination* and resulting from coercion. But individual indifference also means, especially for the wage-laborer, some kind of self-reification which is open to either self-alienation or compensations. Here one cannot dismiss as a mere legal fiction the status of the wage-laborer as a free person and his decisions as free choices. On the contrary, the inner strength and historical superiority of capitalism rests on the fact that the wage-laborer performs his self-objectification, certain qualifications notwithstanding, in an act of free will. But if he has the freedom to live his life in a certain way – even if he does choose to live a highly specialized life –, how can one criticize this choice? What should keep him from finding a life of this sort worthwhile and from compensating for the restrictions and sacrifices, which he himself has chosen, with certain social conveniences such as in the sphere of consumption, for example?

[8] For the problem of Marx's relation to morality and justice see Lohmann 1986 and Angehrn and Lohmann 1986.

To these questions Marx gives answers; first from the point of view of the wage-laborer: Marx tries to show empirically that the wage-laborer's experiences and evaluative feelings qualify his volitional autonomy *both* as empty and meaningless *and* as a historical potentiality to overcome capitalist society. But more clearly, Marx is judging from an outside view, referring to a normative concept of self-realization and to normative standards of productivity and his objective theory of history. I cannot discuss Marx's answers here in a satisfactory manner[9] but my thesis is that in the end these answers are not convincing. In my opinion, Georg Simmel offers us a better and more differentiated approach to answering these questions. I use this as a transition to the second part of my paper.3. Georg Simmel's analysis of modernity: the ambivalence of indifference.

In his *Philosophy of Money* Simmel attributes fundamental importance to the problem of indifference by giving it the status of a general "symbol" of modernity.[10] At the same time he plays down the problem by dealing with possible compensations for the negative effects of indifference. The fact that in the end such compensations, according to Simmel, prove unsatisfactory, makes him particularly interesting for us today. I see Simmel's present significance in his very subtle diagnosis of this ambivalence of modernity – socially, culturally and individually. Sim-

[9] These questions are discussed in Elster 1985, see also Cohen 1988 and Lohmann 1991; now Lohmann 2018b.

[10] In this paper I am referring mainly to what is called Simmel's second period of his writings, which extends from about 1895 to 1908; the main book of this period is obviously *The Philosophy of Money*, edited 1900, 2nd edition 1907. I leave aside a comparison of the 1st and the 2nd editions; in quotations I am referring first to the German 7th edition (Simmel 1977), but I quote according to the English edition (Simmel 1978).

mel commands particular attention at present because he shows a profound awareness that neither reversion to pre-modern assumptions nor magnification of a particular aspect of modern society can resolve the ambivalence of modernity.

3.1 The signature of modernity

In his writings prior to 1900 Simmel had already attempted to clarify the basic structures of modern society. In *The Philosophy of Money* he enhances and verifies his model by applying it to the conflict-laden categories of "life" and "money" (Blumenberg 1976). The possibility of choosing money as the symbol of modernity relates closely, of course, to Marx's analysis of capitalism. Money, for both Simmel and Marx, is the most characteristic expression of indifference: "indifference itself" (Simmel 1977: VII; 1978: 55). As one might expect, Simmel does have other explanations for the causes of indifference and of money. But he sees their consequences and by-products in a way completely analogous to Marx. For him, too, the transfer of money and the exchange of commodities constitute the specific social phenomena which dissolve all traditional relationships and which form the foundation of modern society.

Like Marx, Simmel defines modernity as the dissolution of tradition and history. Simmel, however, goes further than Marx in that he amplifies the opposition of modernity toward traditional categories. One can distinguish here three aspects according to which Simmel characterizes modernity within his formal model: firstly by processes of *dissolution of substance*, secondly by the consequences of the *loss of ultimate ends*, and thirdly by a

fundamental "relationalism", which means that every item is related to other items. The idea behind these three aspects of Simmel's characterization of modernity becomes clear in the negation of the basic concepts involved: *substance*, *ultimate ends* and *the absolute*. These concepts stand for fundamental assumptions of metaphysically based, traditional world views, which, designated abstractly, are not historically or culturally determined.

The first aspect of Simmel's characterization of modernity emphasizes the decomposition of independently existing and enduring substances into mere "motions, the bearers of which are increasingly divested of any specific qualities" (Simmel 1977: 64; 1978: 103). Qualities are understood as expressions of quantifiable relationships between atoms, which are themselves obscure in the sense that they lack all distinct characteristics (Böhringer 1976). Despite the interference of a "virtually unavoidable habit of substantialization" (Simmel 1893: 309, my own translation) modernity is in this respect the "dissolution of substance for the sake of function, the erosion of what is fixed and enduring in the stream of ceaseless developments" (Simmel 1893: 359).

Simmel agrees with Marx in this point. Although Marx does speak of a "substance of value", which is supposed to regulate the unity of capitalist society, the substantial nature of value is in fact merely a means for simplification (comparable to the habit of substantialization) which owes its existence to the biased and false conceptual framework associated with the circulation of commodities. Value is actually nothing more than the

self-referential expression of the unceasing, undefinable cycle of capitalist production. Movement replaces "substance".

It is the second aspect of Simmel's characterization, the loss of ultimate ends, which distinguishes him from Marx. Despite his awareness of the difficulties connected with such a thesis, Marx retains the premise of "a determination of man", who strives toward the ideal of "fraternal self-fulfillment" (Lohmann 1986) and self-realization in the diverse, creative and social development of his talents. History thus provides man with an ultimate reference for his goals.

Simmel, however, replaces ideals of perfection, which man is supposed to achieve, with developmental trends. Simmel sees the determination of human ends not teleologically but rather subjectively (Simmel 1893: 337f.). Such a perspective leads finally to the conclusion that there is no absolute peak in the series of human ends, but rather that "the series of life-goals end at various different points" (Simmel 1893: 348). Moreover, there is for Simmel no ultimate end which could not itself become a means. Whereas for Marx, as in the substantialist, pre-modern view of the world in general, human life acquires meaning and value only in its relationship to ultimate ends, Simmel attempts to meet this demand with the "formal function of setting any goals at all" (Simmel 1893: 360).

With regard to the third aspect, the replacement of absolutes by relations, Marx and Simmel agree up to a certain point. In his criticism of Hegel, Marx had rejected the supremacy of an absolute spirit as idealistic; later, he likewise rejected abstract, absolute materialism. For him, too, it is exchange, a relation of

relationships, which constitutes modern society. Moreover, at first glance Marx appears to think that morality and law can be understood only as relative to a particular social formation.[11] But he stops short of Simmel, who deduces from "relationalism" a fundamental relativism. Marx could not, indeed, draw such a conclusion without giving up the thesis of a definite end inherent in the determination of man, his self-fulfillment.

For Simmel, the dissolution of substance and the loss of ultimate ends lead not only to a relational position but also to a fundamental relativism. The calm security previously derived "from below" from the solidity of substance or "from above" from the dignity of ultimate ends, remains a problem in his relativism. He opposes "the skeptical loosening of all footholds" (apud Gassen and Landmann 1958: 9) and attempts to develop a relativism for which "an absolute is not required as a conceptual counterpart to the relativity of things" (Simmel 1977: 65; 1978: 104), but which is nonetheless able to provide a "new concept of solidity" (Gassen and Landmann 1958: 9). This programmatic demand for a "new solidity" within the boundaries of a fundamental relativism shows Simmel's reservations with regard to the advance of modernity.

3.2 Socialization process by interaction (Wechselwirkung)

Within this general framework for the interpretation of modernity, Simmel describes the socialization process by means of the functions performed by money in modern society. Simmel, like Marx and Aristotle, sees society as based on exchange;

[11] See Angern and Lohmann 1986 and Lohmann 2018b.

the difference in the case of Simmel lies in his *subjective theory of values*.

To begin with, "value" means for Simmel only that a desiring subject does not yet enjoy a desired object. The distance which the subject senses in not yet enjoying the object determines its value (Simmel 1977: 12; 1978: 66). Simmel describes the existence of values as an "irreducible phenomenon" – which, nonetheless, possesses a metaphysical foundation. The ego and its object rest unseparated in an "inscrutable" "state of indifferences" of the soul. And from this source, reminiscent of Schelling's "absolute indifference", all differences, including that of subject and object, come to be (1977: 8f.; 1978: 62f.).

Value is a judgment concerning a desired object and one "which remains inherent in the subject" (1977: 8f.; 1978: 62f.). Its magnitude reveals itself in the efforts and sacrifices needed to overcome "distance, obstacles and difficulties" (1977: 13; 1978: 66). Thus, mere animalistic enjoyment, in which desire and consumption coincide and which according to Simmel is typical for "primitive man", is devoid of value. Value arises only when natural desire is *cultivated*. And culture occurs only when subject and object are separated – i.e. when something is valued.

Simmel's subjective theory of value is thus a theory of *culture*. His theory of value explains why culture forms the foundation of society and why society can be conceived as culture. But in order for subjective and cultivated values to give rise to society, one must go beyond the level of the individual. A sphere of values which exists independently of subjective feelings and personal assessments is necessary. Simmel thus characterizes soci-

ety, the sphere meeting this requirement, as an "*übersinguläre(s) Gebilde*" ("a structure that transcends the individual") (1977: 60; 1978: 101).

Society (like the economic sphere) is based on exchange, in which "two values are interwoven" (1977: 27; 1978: 78). Person A desires the object of person B and thus sacrifices an object which he values. The relative value of the exchanged objects, which is created in this manner, is, following Simmel, measured by the extent of the sacrifices involved. For this reason, Simmel notes, "it *appears* that there is a *reciprocal* determination of value by the objects" (1977: 28; 1978: 78). The parallel to Marx is obvious here. For Simmel such a determination of relative value no longer requires any reference to the emotional attachments of A and B to the objects involved; thus value, in becoming relative, attains to objectivity. The relativity of value itself is simply a "mutual relationship", which keeps "the balance between sacrifice and gain" (1977: 33; 1978: 81). It is *interaction* (*Wechselwirkung*) (1977: 33; 1978: 82).[12]

The fact that such interaction can in principle produce an unlimited number of relationships neutralizes the individual values which, nonetheless, always figure in the formation of value. The entrance of money into the sphere of exchange contributes further to the neutralization of individual values. Essentially, money only represents the super-personal, mutual, and thus objective value of things. But it also increases the independence of social interactions from personal feelings and thus enhances relational opportunities. The complexity of society can grow

[12] See also Tenbruck 1958: 94ff. and Frisby 1981.

indefinitely. Thus, says Simmel in summary, money acquires its "philosophical significance:" It reveals "the formula of all being according to which things receive their meaning through each other, and have their being determined by their mutual relations." (1977: 98; 1978: 128f.).

Simmel sees in the "derivation" of money touched on in the above remarks a confirmation of his relativistic view of modernity. He can then, reversing his point of view, observe and assess the results of relativism by examining the effects of money "upon the inner world – upon the vitality of individuals (*Lebensgefühl*!), upon the linking of their fates, upon culture in general" (1977: VI; 1978: 54). On the one hand, money intensifies and broadens relational and relativistic processes. On the other hand, it is supposed to fulfill the programmatic demand for a "new solidity". We must now see how Simmel attempts to realize this intention by playing down the problems of indifference.

3.3 Positive and negative aspects of indifference

Simmel plays down the problem of indifference by dividing it into its components. He first identifies its positive aspects; then, he differentiates its various negative aspects and shows corresponding forms of compensation offered by modern society.

Positive are all cultural and social developments which magnify indifference in the sense of an independence of social relationships from individual will and from personal experience. The societal division of labor resulting from money, labor-saving social differentiation (which either follows from or leads to the

division of labor), the inner multiplicity of increasingly functional specialization and generalization – in a word, the entire proliferous complexity of modern society (a society with neither top nor center according to Simmel) – couldn't develop at all were its growth dependent upon the intellectual and practical capacities of individuals. Simmel insists that the individuals of modern society are not completely socialized (Simmel 1908a), but instead retain the freedom of "non-socialization". Such an *a priori* possibility of distancing oneself from social determinants gives benefits to both: to the individual and to the society.

To the positive aspects of indifference (in the sense of objectification) also belong the processes of rationalization, which Simmel describes in some aspects, thus the calculating effects of the use of money, the growth of scientific world-views and the intellectualization of modern life-styles. These various facets of objectification and rationalization, which Max Weber later pointed out in his theory of rationalization, relate to the effects of the non-interdependence between the individual and society. Simmel assesses as positive the emancipatory effects of increasing socialization by means of money, in so far as it liberates individuals and their cultural and social institutions from the constraints of traditional and/or rural relationships and of those determined by class.

Less positive are the effects of the *leveling or equalization* of values which results from increasing objectification of social interactions. Simmel shows the effects of equalization to follow inescapably from the processes of social differentiation inasmuch as individuation (a development parallel to that of differ-

entiation) leads to "recognition of the principle of the *formal* equality of all men" (Lichtblau 1984: 242). But equalization also has "tragic consequences" because it "inescapably takes effect where the higher level is pulled down to a greater extent than the lower level can be raised" (Simmel 1977: 433; 1978: 392). It thus corrupts not only the "social meaning of distinction (*Vornehmheit*)" (1977: 431; 1978: 390). but also the principle of individuation itself, which rests according to Simmel upon the capacity for difference.

Negative are the various forms of indifference resulting from money and the objectification of social interactions because indifference relates to the personal feelings always involved in the generation and manifestation of values. Forms of such indifference include feelings or moods of boredom, inertia, displeasure, meaninglessness and anxiety. I will return presently to this topic.

4. Compensations and indifference

We previously noted that Simmel attempts to offer compensations in modern society for the negative aspects of socially produced indifference. It is important that here, too, Simmel decomposes the array of problems (Luhmann 1981: vol. 2, 353f.). In *The Philosophy of Money* Simmel distinguishes between society, culture and person (soul) as heterogeneous components of modernity.[13] Compensations are supposed to derive from the

[13] In his last period, mainly dominated by a philosophy of life (Lebensphilosophie) these differences are revoked by the concept of life.

mutual exclusion and interdependence of these heterogeneous components. I suspect, however, that the negative elements for which Simmel seeks compensations more or less dominate and in the end merely take on different appearances.

4.1 Social compensations: indifference and life-styles

For Simmel the social derives from the interactions of individuals, who do not themselves merely play social roles (Simmel 1908). The individual thus attains relative freedom in relationship to the social sphere. This allows a basic distance from all social demands, and this distance paradoxically increases with the modernization of society. Increasing division of labor, further social differentiation and the development of a monetary economy all raise the degree of independence of the individual from the functional whole of society. Moreover, such factors press the individual into the "intersection" of various conflicting spheres or functional imperatives (Simmel 1893: 385). The increase of both: dependence and conflict, on the one hand, contrasts with increasing independence and indifference with respect to specific achievements, things or persons, on the other. Simmel interprets the latter as individual freedom, which is for him "often in fact only a change of obligations" (*Wechsel der Verpflichtungen*) (1977: 297; 1978: 283). Here freedom has the meaning of freedom from something and involves no specification of its consequences (1977: 444ff.; 1978: 400ff.).

Tensions between dependence on the conflict-laden social complex and indifference with regard to the singular characterize the forced individualization of modern society. Such individ-

ualization leads to the formation of modern *life-styles*, determined by "ongoing processes of liberation" (1977: 449; 1978: 403f.) and at the same time by efforts to counteract indifference and devaluation of the meaningful through the creation of new social bonds (1977: 447; 1978: 402f.).

Proceeding from this "deep yearning to give things a new importance", Simmel explains the "search for new styles, for style as such" (1977: 449; 1978: 404). Stylizations of life are expressions of a self-experience of modernity (Lohmann 1999). For one thing, they ameliorate the "almost unbearably poignant" subjectivism of the modern individual in that they lend to the expressions and the environment of life a sort of universality (Simmel 1908b: 314). But they represent in particular a "veiling of the personal", which forms a wall separating individuals from other persons and objects (Simmel 1977: 537; 1978: 473). The value of a life-style results from the distance it represents. The creation of distance makes the near seem far and brings the distant closer. Its goal is closeness, the intention being intensity of relationship (1977: 24, 522f.; 1978: 75f., 462ff.).

Simmel hopes that modern man can compensate for insidious indifference by continued stylization, by the rapid succession of styles characteristic of fashion (Simmel 1911: 26ff.) and by the refinement of his sensitivity toward difference. In this hope certainly lies a class-specific view, which reclaims the "ideal of nobility" (*Vornehmheit*) and distance for the educated class over and against the unmannered proletarian masses.[14] It remains for Simmel an open question whether such stylization

[14] See Bourdieu 1982 and Hübner-Funk 1984.

can actually fulfill its function or whether it merely serves as a sedative to counteract modern indifference.

4.2 Cultural compensations: tragedy and aestheticism

Cultivation provides a further form of compensation. That the process of cultivation leads to a self-inflicted tragedy, inherent in the increasing dissociation and indifference of objective culture toward the cognitive and affective abilities of individuals, is Simmel's best-known theorem (Simmel 1977: 502ff.; 1978: 446ff.; 1911: 183ff.).[15] The modern life-style reacts to this inner-cultural problem by *aestheticizing*. The fascination with the life of the artist, the cult of genius and the romantic search for the authentic self are facets of aestheticism, all of which are in the end guided by expressionistic educational ideals. According to Simmel, an aesthetic life-style makes possible a distanced attitude towards the different contents of cultural objects. Such distance allows a selective cultural orientation and can often find satisfaction in the appreciation of mere form (Tenbruck 1958: 590).

Aestheticism can also degenerate into a blasé or reserved stance (Simmel 1977: 264ff.; 1978: 255ff.; 1957: 232f.) Such characteristics are typical for the inhabitants of metropolises. Simmel compares the aesthete of this sort with the miser, who gains satisfaction from fully appropriated potentiality, which never considers its actualization (1977: 242ff.; 1978: 238ff.). In the end Simmel leaves the question unanswered whether the aestheticizing of life-styles can compensate for this tragedy. He hesitates to

[15] See also Frisby 1984: 107ff. and Lichtblau 1986.

call the soul "master in its own [cultural (G.L.)] house" (1977: 529; 1978: 467).

4.3 Personal (seelische) *compensations: yearning for unity; nervousness; and internal distance*

The compensatory possibilities relating to the third, the personal, component of modernity, can be understood only in connection with Simmel's conception of different forms of individuality[16] and with his metaphysical concept of the soul (*Seele*) (Lichtblau 1986). Here too, there are no substantial presuppositions, the individual life is fragmentary and constituted as a whole by the "views of the others" (Simmel 1908a: 24ff.), and the soul has no "substantial unity" (Simmel 1977: 84; 1978: 117). and is accessible only by symbolic interpretations. But what is important for our considerations is that the soul is responsible for man's ceaseless yearning for unity and for the promise of a meaningful life (1977: 527ff.; 1978: 466ff. and Simmel 1911: 184). According to Simmel, cultural overproduction and the "glamorous splendor of the scientific-technological age" muffle this yearning, but they do not inhibit its effects.

The presence of such yearning expresses itself in the area of modern life-styles insofar as there is a reaction to the ner-

[16] See e.g. Simmel 1957: 227ff. and 251ff. and Simmel 1970: 68ff.; one has to distinguish a quantitative or functional from a qualitative type of individuality and furthermore two characteristic forms of individualism: the individual autarchia (*individuelle Unabhängigkeit*) and personal uniqueness (*persönliche Sonderart*). I leave these important aspects aside here, because the problem of individuality and society in Simmel's work needs considerations referring to his whole writings which will break the limits of this essay. I discuss the problem of "two forms of individualism and the metropole" in: Lohmann 1993 (English version: Lohmann 1996).

vousness typical of modern man. His "haste and excitement" illustrate his "lack of something definite at the center of the soul" and drive him "to search for momentary satisfaction in ever-new stimulations, sensations and external activities" (Simmel 1977: 551). The cult of the present, of the fleeting moment (Frisby 1981; 1984), provides the expression of modern man's search for momentary enjoyment, just as the metropolis provides the location in which the "intensification of nervous activity" (Simmel 1957: 228) can thrive and in which the rhythm and pace of modern life-styles fluctuate (Simmel 1977: 552ff.; 1978: 485ff.; Müller 1988). Simmel goes so far as to define modernity as a period of psychologizing, of "experiencing and interpreting the world according to inner reactions and, in effect, as an inner world" (Simmel 1911: 152). The sensitive and nervous man of the modern city would completely despair if there were no internal counterpart to external distance. Therefore Simmel shows the positive effects of "the intellectualistic character of the metropolitan way of life" ("*des intellekualistische[n] Charakter[s] des großstädtischen Seelenlebens*") (1911: 228)[17] for the two "forms of individualism", which are developed by the quantitative relations of the metropolis. Both, the "individual autarchia and the development of personal uniqueness" (1911: 241f.) presuppose an internal distance. Here, too, Simmel offers a dual interpretation: on the one hand, he interprets internal distance as a sort of catharsis which can lead to "productive indifference" and spontaneous creativity (Böhringer 1984). For the non-artists of

[17] See also Lohmann 1993 or 1996.

modernity, on the other hand, Simmel recommends the attempt at an alliance with "superficiality" (Simmel 1923: 15).[18]

5. Can negative freedom be positive?

In light of the theory of the tragic development of culture and of the compensatory stylization of modern life, we can now return to the problem of the effects of indifference. Considering the general character of Simmel's attempts to play down the problem of indifference, one particularly notices that the positive assessment of phenomena connected with indifference consistently relates to a process of liberation. Here, f*orms of negative freedom are assessed as positive*. The negative aspects of indifference invariably stem from the fact that the transition from freedom *from* something to freedom *to do or become* something doesn't really succeed. This problem provides a constant irritation for all compensatory life-styles.

In truth, Simmel thinks, the concept "to be free" signifies negative as well as positive freedom. Freedom, he writes, "would be without meaning and value if the casting off of commitments were not, at the same time, supplemented by a gain in possessions or power: freedom from something implies, at the same time, freedom to do something" (Simmel 1977: 445; 1978: 400). Modernity dissolves this internal connection between "freedom from" and "freedom to do" something, in presenting one aspect of freedom in purified form: "Money solves the task of realizing

[18] See also Lohmann 1992.

human freedom in a purely negative sense" (1977: 446; 1978: 402). On this *basis*, however, any effort toward positive freedom becomes increasingly *meaningless*. For this reason, the "typical boredom, lack of purpose in life and inner restlessness" (1977: 447; 1978: 402) general and inescapable for modern man, continually occur.

Simmel points out that there are not only negative moods which show the failure of the principle of negative freedom, he also speaks of the "hope" and the "deep yearning", to give things a new and profound meaning (1977: 447; 1978: 402). Simmel is in this respect our contemporary. Especially his thesis that freedom cannot be understood in a purely negative way nowadays is being supported by Charles Taylor (1985: 211ff.). One can interpret what Simmel says without recourse to his metaphysical conception of the soul, by attempting to explain the interconnection between various moods – particularly between those relating to our experiences of meaninglessness and of a not yet attained but felt and desired unity of life. Such an attempt provides a promising approach to questions about the components of value in our emotional life and to questions about the concept of meaning (Tugendhat 1979; Wolf 1986 and Taylor 1985). It would be another lecture to discuss modern concepts of a meaningful life and compare them to Simmel's concept of an "individual law" (Simmel 1968 and 1918; my interpretation: Lohmann 1992); in his later writings he tries by means of this concept to develop a solution to this problem.

Simmel, our contemporary in posing these questions, remains – with respect to the answers offered – a representative

of his time. One must say not only, in agreement with Simmel, that the monetary economy creates only the illusion of the fulfillment of our hopes but also that Simmel himself is deceived. Simmel's description of money as the "gatekeeper of the most intimate sphere" (Simmel 1977: 532; 1978: 470) has become famous. He explains that "all the material contents of life become increasingly objective and impersonal, so that the remainder that cannot be reified becomes all the more personal, all the more the indisputable property of the self" (Simmel 1978: 469). Simmel relies here on the previously noted "inscrutable unity" of the soul, which lies deeper than culture and thus does not suffer from the cultural or social tragedy of modernity. The soul retains an "absolute indifference". But if the soul resides in the distant realm of metaphysics, it can have no relevance for real, individual people. And Simmel himself says of the attempt of the individual to live "freedom as indifference":[19] "Man's position in the world is thereby shifted … Not wanting to have needs is merely foolish pride" (Simmel 1923: 25f.). An extramundane anchor cannot save the inner-worldly man. The signature of modernity turns out to be indifference: but it is an extremely ambivalent indifference after all.

Data de publicação: 28/09/2019

[19] That's the title of a book by F. Scholz about N. Luhmann (Scholz 1982).

References

ANGEHRN, E; LOHMANN, G (eds.). *Ethik und Marx: Moralkirtik und normative Grundlagen der Marxschen Theorie*. Königstein/Ts: Hain Verlag bei Athenäum, 1986.

ATOJI, Y. *Georg Simmel's Sociological Horizons*. Tokyo: Ochanomizu-shobo, 1986.

BLUMENBERG, H. "Geld oder Leben. Eine metaphorologische Studie zur Konsistenz der Philosophie Georg Simmels". In: Ästhetik und Soziologie um die Jahrhundertwende: Georg Simmel (ed. H. Böhringer, K. Gründer). Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1976.

BÖHRINGER, J. "Spuren von spekulativen Atomismus in Simmels formaler Soziologie". In: *Ästhetik und Soziologie um die Jahrhundertwende: Georg Simmel* (ed. H. Böhringer, K. Gründer). Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1976.

_____. "Die "Philosophie des Geldes" als ästhetische Theorie. Stichworte zur Aktualität Georg Simmels für die moderne bildende Kunst". In: *Georg Simmel und die Modern* (ed. H.-J. Dahme, O. Rammstedt). Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1984.

BÖHRINGER, J; GRÜNDER, K. (eds.). *Ästhetik und Soziologie um die Jahrhundertwende: Georg Simmel*. Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1976.

BOURDIEU, P. *Die feinen Unterschiede. Kritik der gesellschaftlichen Urteilskraft*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1982.

COHEN, G. A. *History, Labour and Freedom, Themes from Marx*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

DAHME, H.-J.; RAMMSTEDT, O. (eds.). *Georg Simmel und die Moderne*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1984.

ELSTER, J. *Making sens of Marx*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

FRISBY, D. "Introduction to the Translation". In: G. Simmel. *The Philosophy of Money* (ed. T. Bottomore, D. Frisby). London/Boston: Routledge, 1978.

_____. *Sociological Impressionism: A Reassessment of Georg Simmel's Social Theory*. London: Heinemann, 1981.

_____. "Georg Simmels Theorie der Moderne". In: *Georg Simmel und die Moderne* (ed. H.-J. Dahme, O. Rammstedt). Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1984.

_____. *Fragmente der Moderne. Georg Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin*. Rheda-Wiedenbrück: Dedalus, 1989.

GASSEN, K.; LANDMANN, M. (eds.). *Buch des Dankes an Georg Simmel. Briefe, Erinnerungen, Bibliographie*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1958.

HÜBNER-FUNK, S. "Die ästhetische Konstituierung gesellschaftlicher Erkenntnis am Begriff der Philosophie des Geldes". In: *Georg Simmel und die Moderne* (ed. H.-J. Dahme; H. J. Rammstaedt). Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1984.

LICHTBLAU, K. "Das "Pathos der Distanz". Präliminarien zur Nietzsche-Rezeption bei Georg Simmel". In: *Georg Simmel und die Moderne* (ed. H.-J. Dahme; H. J. Rammstaedt). Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1984.

_____. "Die Seele und das Geld. Kulturtheoretische Implikationen in Georg Simmels ‚Philosophie des Geldes'". *Kultur und Gesellschaft (Sonderheft 27 der Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie)*, p. 57-74, 1986.

LOHMANN, G. "Authentisches und verdinglichtes Leben. Neuere Literatur zu Georg Lukács "Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein". *Philosophische Rundschau* 30 (3/4), 1983.

_____. "Zwei Konzeptionen von Gerechtigkeit in Marx' Kapitalismuskritik". In: *Ethik und Marx: Moralkirtik und normative Grundlagen der Marxschen Theorie* (ed. E. Angehrn, G. Lohmann). Königstein/Ts: Hain Verlag bei Athenäum, 1986.

_____. *Indifferenz und Gesellschaft: Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit Marx*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1991.

_____. "Fragmentierung, Oberflächlichkeit und Ganzheit individueller Existenz. Negativismus bei Georg Simmel". In: *Dialektischer Negativismus* (ed. E. Angehrn, H. Fink-Eitel, Ch. Iber, G. Lohmann). Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1992.

_____. "Die Anpassung des individuellen Lebens an die innere Unendlichkeit der Großstädte. Formen der Individualisierung bei Simmel". *Berliner Journal für Soziologie* 2, p. 153-160, 1993.

_____. "The Adaption of Individual Life to the Inner Infinity of the Metropolis. Forms of Individualization in Simmel". *Thesis Eleven* 4, p. 1-11, 1996.

_____. "Der Schleier zwischen uns und den Dingen: Georg Simmels ‚Stilisierung'". In: *Persönliche Objekte, Identität und Entwicklung* (ed. U. Fuhrer, I. E. Josephs). Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999.

_____. "Von der Entfremdung zur Entwürdigung. Eine kritische Revision der Marx'schen Entfremdungskritik". In: *Der aufrechte Gang im windschiefen Kapitalismus. Modelle kritischen Denkens* (ed. R. Dannemann, H. Pickford, H-E. Schiller). Wiesbaden: Springer-VS, 2018a.

_____. "Normative und rechtsstaatliche Kapitalismuskritiken und ihre Verdrängung bei Marx". *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 66 (4), p. 429-465, 2018b.

LOHMANN, G., ANGEHRN, E. (eds.). *Ethik und Marx: Moralkritik und normative Grundlagen der Marxschen Theorie*. Königstein im Taunus: Althenaeum Verlag, 1968.

LUHMANN, N. *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1981.

MARX, K. G*rundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*. Berlin: Dietz, 1953.

MÜLLER, L. "Die Großstadt als Ort der Moderne. Über Georg Simmel". In: *Die Unwirklichkeit der Städte* (ed. K. R. Scherpe). Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1988.

RITTER, J. "Person und Eigentum". In: *Metaphysik und Politik*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1977.

SIMMEL, G. *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft. Eine Kritik ethischer Grundbegriffe* (vol. 2). Berlin: Hertz, 1893.

_____. "Exkurs über das Problem: Wie ist Gesellschaft möglich?". In: *Soziologie*. Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1908.

_____. "Das Problem des Stils". *Dekorative Kunst* 11 (7), p. 307-316, 1908.

_____. *Philosophische Kultur. Über das Abenteuer, die Geschlechter und die Krise der Moderne. Gesammelte Essais. Mit einem Vorwort von Jürgen Habermas.* Berlin: Wagenbach, 1983 [1911].

_____. *Lebensanschauung. Vier metaphysische Kapitel.* München/Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1918.

_____. *Fragmente und Aufsätze aus dem Nachlaß und Veröffentlichungen der letzten Jahre* (ed. G. Kantorowicz). München: Drei Masken, 1923.

_____. *Brücke und Tür. Essays des Philosophen zur Geschichte, Religion, Kunst und Gesellschaft* (ed. M. Landmann). Stuttgart: K. F. Koehler, 1957.

_____. *Das Individuelle Gesetz. Neuausgabe mit einem Nachwort von K. Ch. Köhnke* (ed. M. Landmann). Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp, 1987 [1968].

_____. *Grundfragen der Soziologie*, 3. Aufl. Berlin: Göschen, 1970.

_____. D*ie Philosophie des Geldes.* Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1977 [1900].

_____. *The Philosophy of Money* (transl. T. Bottomore, D. Frisby). London/Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

TAYLOR, Ch. *Philosophical Papers: Volume 2, Philosophy and Human Sciences.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

TENBRUCK, F. "Georg Simmel (1958-1918)". *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 10, p. 589-614, 1958.

THEUNISSEN, M. "Die verdrängte Intersubjektivität in Hegels Philosophie des Rechts". In: *Hegels Philosophie des Rechts. Die Theorie der Rechtsformen und ihre Logik* (ed. D. Henrich, R-P. Horstmann). Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982.

_____. "Produktive Innerlichkeit". *Frankfurter Hefte extra 6*, p. 103-110, 1984.

TUGENDHAT, E. *Selbstbewußtsein und Selbstbestimmung*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1979.

WOLF, U. "Was es heißt, sein Leben zu leben". *Philosophische Rundschau* 33 (3/4), p. 242-265, 1986.