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Autor	Thomas Kemple
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INFINITE ENDS AND THE TEMPO OF LIFE

Notes on the Marx / Simmel
Divergence / Convergence

Thomas Kemple¹

ABSTRACT

Simmel's arguments in the *Philosophy of Money* on individual freedom and exchange-value seems to contradict Marx's arguments in *Capital* concerning exploitation and labour-value. At the same time, his ideas on the transformation of means into ends as the basis for a new style of life also complement Marx's examination of the dynamics of objectification, alienation, and reification in capitalist money economies. This essay elaborates on this divergence and convergence in the work of Marx and Simmel with reference to how they address the pace and tempo of modern life. To the degree that both thinkers left a lasting impression in the work of Georg Lukács, some attention is also given to the implications of their ideas for post-Marxist critical theory. In short, the conceptual problem of capital conversion – the spatial-temporal process of valorization and transvaluation of life and labour through money and machines – provides the common ground between their approaches to value and reification as well as a fruitful source for future analysis.

¹ Professor of Sociology, The University of British Columbia (Canada). E-mail address: kemple@mail.ubc.ca.

KEYWORDS

Value, Money, Commodity, Consumer culture, Reification

FINS INFINITOS E O RITMO DA VIDA

Notas sobre a Divergência / Convergência Marx / Simmel

RESUMO

Os argumentos de Simmel sobre a liberdade individual e o valor de troca na Filosofia do Dinheiro pareçam contradizer os argumentos de Marx no Capital sobre exploração e valor-trabalho. Ao mesmo tempo, suas ideias sobre a transformação de meios em fins como base para um novo estilo de vida também complementam a análise de Marx sobre as dinâmicas de objetificação, alienação e reificação nas economias monetárias capitalistas. Este texto desenvolve essa divergência e essa convergência na obra de Marx e Simmel com referência a como eles abordam o ritmo e o tempo da vida moderna. Na medida em que ambos os pensadores deixaram uma impressão duradoura no trabalho de Georg Lukács, algumas atenções também são dadas às implicações de suas ideias para a teoria crítica pós-marxista. Em resumo, o problema conceitual da conversão de capital – o processo espaço-temporal de valorização e transvalorização da vida e do trabalho por meio do dinheiro e das máquinas – fornece o terreno comum entre suas abordagens do valor e da reificação, bem como uma fonte frutífera para uma análise futura.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Valor, Dinheiro, Mercadoria, Cultura do consumidor, Reificação

Value and Exchange: The Marx/Simmel Divergence²

In the “Preface” to the *Philosophy of Money* (Simmel 2004; hereafter PM), Georg Simmel states that his basic intention is to explore the “upper and lower boundaries” that reach beyond the domain of economic facts. A few pages later he elaborates on this perspective by stating that he aims to recover “the ideal depths” beneath the economic base of practical and vital existence: “The attempt is made to construct a new storey beneath historical materialism such that the explanatory value of the incorporation of economic life into the causes of intellectual culture is preserved, while these economic forms themselves are recognized as the result of more profound valuations and currents of psychological or even metaphysical preconditions” (PM: 54). In other words, he does not dispute that material conditions give rise to intellectual culture, but adds that these economic conditions are themselves shaped by deeper cognitive and even metaphysical processes. The implied reference to Marx here (although Marx himself did not use the phrase “historical materialism”) gives us a helpful clue to understanding the originality of Simmel’s project. Using Marx’s topographical imagery of base and superstructure, Simmel suggests that his philosophy of money digs beneath a political economy of capital in order to

² This essay reproduces and expands on some arguments I make in Part I of my recent book *Simmel* (Kemple 2018). Earlier versions of this essay were presented on two occasions: I am grateful to Babak Amini, Nigel Dodd, and Dominika Partyga for hosting me at the London School of Economics, and to Mariana Teixeira and Arthur Bueno for organizing the panel I took part in at the International Sociological Association Meetings in Toronto.

explore its deeper sources, and also to recover its contemporary relevance.

At first glance, the differences between Marx and Simmel appear to be more a matter of emphasis, focus, and style than of disciplinary approach, general outlook, or theoretical perspective. Where Marx stresses the primacy of economic production and class conflicts, Simmel addresses the effects of these processes on the circulation of money and commodities and on consumer culture generally. We could say that Marx's concern is for the most part with the *production of the worker and class relations* while Simmel's is more with *the seduction of the consumer and the metaphysics of money circulation* (Leck 2000: 74, 107). Where one highlights how labour is productive of value and how objectified value is alienated through work, the other shows how exchange generates value and how subjectified value is alienated in monetized desire (Pyyhtinen 2017: 71-73). While their approaches converge insofar as they both pose broader philosophical questions about the dominance of capitalist society, they also diverge in how they identify this system's social mechanisms of alienation or assess the political prospects for its transformation.

Simmel could not have been aware of Marx's studies of the alienation of labour or his remarks on "the universal prostitution" of the worker in the posthumously published *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (Marx 1977: 78, 87). Nor would he have been able to draw upon Marx's discussion of the dematerialization of monetary exchanges in the "Chapter on Money" in his *Grundrisse* notebooks of 1857-58, or the character-

ization in these manuscripts of “the automatic system of machinery [as] the last metamorphosis of labour” (Marx 1977: 373; Kemple 1995: 22-29). Although Simmel’s philosophical and sociological treatment of these themes arguably complements Marx’s explicitly economic and activist concerns, their views are marked by a difference in political tone, empirical rigour, and rhetorical style.

Like most German intellectuals of his day, Simmel would have read *The Communist Manifesto* and been struck by the memorable image of how bourgeois society acknowledges “no other nexus [...] than callous ‘cash payment’”, how everything feudal and fixed evaporates and thus “all that is solid melts into air” (Marx 1977: 223, 225). He may also have found inspiration in Chapter 1 of Marx’s *Capital*, where exchange value is analyzed as the “the necessary mode of appearance or form of expression of value”, which is nevertheless independent of this form: “the common substance that manifests itself [*das Gemeinsame, was sich ... darstellt*] in the exchange relation, or in the exchange value of commodities, is their value” (Marx 1977: 423; Marx 1988: 53). But rather than following Marx into the depths of the factory, where workers sell their labour power to produce commodities in exchange for a wage, Simmel explores the surface experiences of buying and selling commodities for money in the marketplace.

As Simmel argues with a rare reference to the third volume of *Capital*, use-value, need, or labour-time alone do not provide an adequate standard of value apart from the circulation and exchange of money (PM: 430). In effect, he elaborates on

what Marx calls “the general formula of capital”, $M-C-M'$, but at the level of circulation: the transformation of money (M) into commodities (C) and back into more money (M'), or buying cheap in order to sell dear (Marx 1977: 445-46). Simmel's primary concern is not with the industrial side of this formula, where labour power – including sex work and intellectual work, although he does examine these at some length in the *Philosophy of Money* – also becomes a commodity to be bought and sold (and thereby exploited) like any other. Rather, he is interested in unpacking the psychology and sociology of trade and commerce along with the philosophy and metaphysics of shopping and consumption.

In Simmel's view, money does not just make workers more exploitable or trade more efficient, as a Marxist theory of labour value or mercantilist theory of commodity value would argue. The value that money adds to life comes from the power it offers people to expand their desires and to choose freely between apparently innumerable objects, as well as in the potentially unlimited ways that money can be saved and spent. This “surplus value” is not just what is extracted from the exploitation of labour, but may also take on material form as property and wealth accumulated through profitable exchanges, or it may assume nonmonetary and apparently immaterial form in a variety of cultural and personal expressions (Spivak 1987). For example, something might acquire symbolic distinction simply by appearing a certain way in a particular context, as Simmel notes with the example of the display of goods at a trade exhibition. As Benjamin might put it, the exhibition value (*Ausstel-*

lungswert) of a commodity may be enhanced insofar as it induces the desire for desire. Today we might note how things may accrue more value insofar as they appear more desirable or worthy of being acquired when they are artfully arranged in a shop window, displayed in a consumer catalogue, or presented on television. These settings alter the ratio between the proximity and distance that consumers must overcome in acquiring or enjoying them, and thereby augment their “tele-value” (as I have argued elsewhere; Kemple 1995: 164). Following Simmel on this point, we could say that *the labour of looking*, such as the way our attention is trained and programmed by advertisements and other media, itself produces value for consumption and exchange (Beller 2006: 243-46).

Simmel goes even further to suggest that this capacity of values to be enhanced and augmented by being exchanged and exhibited, and thus to reach beyond every actual or potential use, constitutes the “metaphysical quality of money”: because money is “the ultimate means”, its distinctive power is “*to realize the possibility of all values as the value of all possibilities*” (PM: 221; my emphasis). This striking formulation summarizes his simple observation that commercial exchanges do not need to take place in any particular physical location, and that consumer culture does not have to be materialized in any one thing or to realize any specific set of personal aspirations, social aims, or cultural ideals. These deeper metaphysical and psychological dynamics underlie what Marx only summarizes with the formula C–M–C’ but does not explore in any depth or detail: the transformation (conversion) of commodities into money and the

exchange of money back again into more or new commodities – the process of selling in order to buy. This logic does not just govern middle class consumers in their frivolous search for the next new fashions but also working people desperately seeking to sell their material or mental labour in order to afford the purchase of things to thrive or survive on.

In the last analysis, Marx describes the monetary conversion of capital as taking place through the promotion of investment and finance, which he analyzes in terms of the formula for how interest-bearing capital somehow seems magically to create more money from money: $M-M'$. Marx's comment in *Capital* on the miser as a kind of productive consumer, who systematically acquires and invests money in order to beget more money, offers a vivid illustration of the transformation of money from a means into a fetish object and end in itself: "This boundless greed after riches, this passionate chase after exchange-value, is common to the capitalist and the miser; but while the miser is a capitalist gone mad, the capitalist is a rational miser" (Marx 1977: 449). When the acquisition of exchange value in the form of money is ruled by a rational system of investment rather than merely an irrational psychology of greed, historical progress may be measured by the capacity for producers and consumers to achieve and set new goals, which in turn become links in a chain that seems to extend to infinity.

Simmel's observations in the *Philosophy of Money* elaborate on this point, but in the direction of a more general set of observations on the underlying logic of means and ends. The most direct route to something is not necessarily the most effi-

cient or speedy one, he points, out, as the example of money shows clearly: “by adding tools we deliberately add a new link to the chain of purposive action, thus showing that the straight road is not always the shortest” (PM: 209). Money is both a material means and a mental tool in an extended *teleological series* that continuously if indirectly links together intentions and outcomes. In other words, money is a link in a sequence of purposes that can prolong the achievement of aims that are close to us or shorten the distance between those that are remote from us. Money is the purest example of a tool, he argues, since it materializes human interdependencies and at the same time emancipates individuals from being bound to the material dynamics of immediate will, natural instinct, and subjective desire (PM: 211).

Marx’s comments on the social structure of finance capital and the psychology of the miser suggests an illuminating contrast to Simmel’s reflections on the philosophy and sociology of avarice and extravagance, and more generally, on the general pattern in which, through money exchanges, “the means become the ends” because, “in the last analysis, ends are only means” (PM: 236). In Chapter 3 of the *Philosophy of Money*, Simmel vividly contrasts the figures of the miser and the spendthrift in ways that recall Marx’s discussion of the logic of exchange value in *Capital* (PM: 228-52). Unlike the prostitute and the client (discussed in Chapter 5 of the *Philosophy of Money*), who become mere means for one another through the mediation of money, the miser and the spendthrift treat money and commodities as absolute ends in themselves. Although these character types

appear to be diametrically opposed, the material substance of money has dissolved for both of them into a pure desire for its own sake (PM: 251). For the miser, the mere state of possession, the stable moment of having accumulated the symbol of value, becomes an enjoyable end itself, and the stockpile of money alone is the greatest source of pleasure. For the spendthrift, by contrast, the process of spending and converting values into other forms is intrinsically pleasurable, and the activities of acquiring particular goods or squandering money are themselves supremely enjoyable (PM: 248).

The extravagant spendthrift thus embodies what we might take to be the formula for consumer capital, $C-C'$, which summarizes the limitless drive for the accumulation of more and ever new goods regardless of the means for doing so. Where accumulation seems like an abstract and fixed state for the miser, expenditure appears to be a fluid and concrete process for the spendthrift. As Simmel observes in an early essay "On the Psychology of Money", spendthrifts "are concerned only with the value of the *thing*, whereas misers are concerned only with the *value* of the thing" (Simmel 1997: 236). Despite appearing to be polar opposites, each social type idealizes the essentially impersonal and absolute qualities of money. Neither can accept the notion that any measure of value should limit their desires or interrupt "the sequence of purposes" mediated by cash, and neither can ever be satisfied with the final consumption of commodities. The stingy old person and the dissolute young gambler are only extreme manifestations of the logic inherent in the

money-form, at least when viewed as a symbol of unlimited desire and set apart from the most basic needs of life (PM: 251).

It is worth reflecting for a moment on Simmel's remarkable characterization of money as the ultimate tool, the supreme energy-saver, and an extremely efficient means for generating and realizing desires. Money becomes *the quintessential technology* insofar as it tends to replace human beings with machines, often by transferring human capacities into machine power or by incorporating machines into human activities. In the final chapter of the *Philosophy of Money*, Simmel offers an example that we can treat as a figure for what is distinctive about this reified character of consumer culture: "the vending machine [*Warenautomat*] is the ultimate example of the technological character of the modern economy. By mechanical means, human relationships are completely eliminated, even in the retail trade where the exchange of commodities was long carried out between one person and another, and the money equivalent is now mechanically exchanged against the commodity" (PM: 460-61; Simmel 1989: 639; see Figure 1). In other words, human relationships in consumer culture can be entirely eliminated (*ausgeschaltet*) by being turned into cogs in a larger system, or by simply being switched off (*ausgeschaltet*) as one would a machine.

The vending machine epitomizes how commodities can be bought without the presence of a seller and how producers can be removed from the sight of consumers. Rather than taking place through face-to-face interactions between retailers and customers, or between companies and clients, commercial

exchanges are accomplished through a three-stage operation that is mechanically mediated by a consumer acting alone and following a standard sequence of generic instructions: 1) *insert* currency; 2) *choose* from an assortment of goods); 3) *consume* instantly, or save for later use. If we recall that Simmel's father owned a chocolate factory, and that the first vending machines manufactured at the end of the 19th century typically featured a selection of chocolates and other sweets, we can begin to imagine the personal, social, and historical significance that the automation (*Automat*) of money, machines, and commodities must have had for him. In our own day, we might think of how *consumer culture becomes self-service culture* in supermarket check-out lines, gas stations, and internet retailers.

The exceptional cases of the miser, the money hoarder, the spendthrift, and the insatiable consumer only point to a more mundane and widespread pattern that is essential to the creation and expansion of the money economy. In developing this more general argument, Simmel also considers how money intensifies the abstract and colourless character of a capitalist culture that estranges people from things and from other people. Like the greedy person who asks only "how much" something costs and not "what, why, or how" one thing comes to be worth more or valued less than something else, the merchant often has to maintain an impersonal distance from other people: "not only is the trader a stranger, but the stranger is also disposed to become a trader" (PM: 225). In European history, he points out, Jews have often taken on this role as both moneylender and typical stranger, and thus as both insider and outsider (PM: 224-27;

Morris-Reich 2003). Generally speaking, the overwhelming abundance of commodities leads to a *blasé* attitude in which the feeling for distinctions between people is lost and the specific qualities of things are viewed with indifference (PM: 256-57).

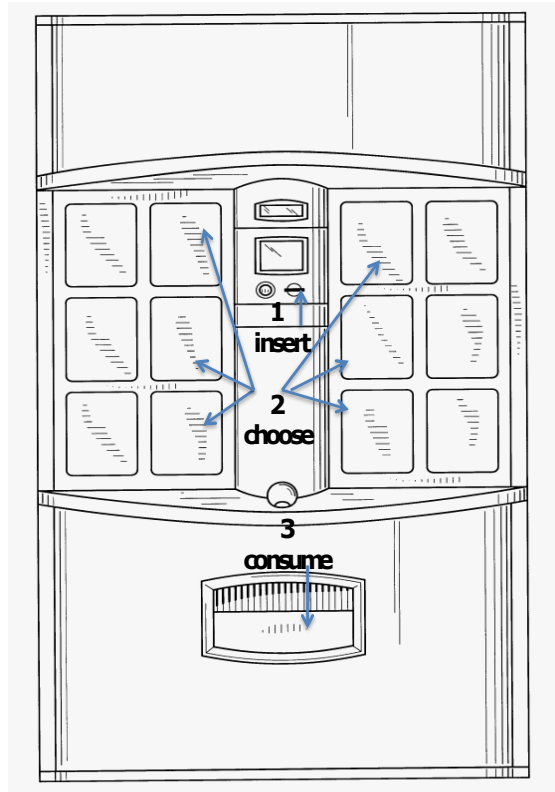


Figure 1: Consumer Culture and the Money Economy (Kemple 2018: 62).

At the same time, the massive proliferation of goods required by the capitalist mode of production, their appearance as “a monstrous accumulation of commodities” (in the memorable opening lines of Marx’s *Capital*), induces a perpetual quest for excitement and a never-ending pursuit of exaggerated differ-

ences (Marx 1977: 421; 1988: 49). Like the extravagant spendthrift, the crazed consumer who is driven to shop for the latest bargains and fashions is constantly on the lookout for ways to spend and save, or for opportunities to buy and give away. Today both the mass media and social media often take on the role of perpetually stimulating and satisfying desires while at the same time frustrating and fueling a bottomless craving for new sensations and shocking impressions. Writing as a cultural critic of and commentator on the everyday experience of capitalism, Simmel tends to postpone or set aside any consideration of the class conflicts, exploitative relationships, and social inequalities that drive this system, even as he remains focused on the alienating dynamics that bring these disturbing phenomena into being.

Rationalization and Reification: the Marx/Simmel Convergence

The play of sanity and irrationality in the age of commodity production is a common concern for both thinkers, although Simmel dramatizes this dynamic more generally as the intrinsic fate and inevitable tragedy of modern culture. His point of departure seems to be the statement in “The Fetish-Character of the Commodity, and Its Secret”, which Marx added to the second edition of *Capital*: “A commodity appears, at first sight, as a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (Marx 1977: 435). Marx’s appar-

ently flippant remark and playful analogy between modern commodities and primitive fetishes, which highlights the *melodramatic* appeal of his critique of political economy (Kemple 1995: 176–83), becomes a very serious and even *tragic* problem for Simmel, who stresses how this savage dynamic is inherent in the destiny of contemporary culture. For both, the exchange of commodities “is a definite social relation between human beings that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (Marx 1977: 436). However, Simmel emphasizes how this process of *reification* – in which social relations are objectified and humans are reduced to things – follows “an immanent developmental logic” within the whole of human existence, adding that this relentless and even reckless tendency is inherent in our modern way of life. As he argues in “The Tragedy of Culture” (from *Philosophical Culture*) with explicit reference to Marx, the contents of culture are “created by human subjects and are meant for human subjects but [...] become alienated from both their origin and their purpose” (Simmel 1997: 70).

Simmel ultimately follows Engels rather than Marx in examining the process by which the cultural logic of money and capital become alienated from physical necessities, including the need for sexual reproduction and personal intimacy. As Engels argues in a statement that profoundly influenced later generations of feminists, naturally driven needs and culturally induced desires make up the political and spiritual stakes in a developmental process that gave rise to the first class conflicts and gender inequalities in human history: “The overthrow of mother-right was the *world historic defeat of the female sex*. The man

took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children” (Engels 1972: 120-21). Engels’s thesis concerning the gendered beginnings of class conflict in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* complements Simmel’s sociology of gender and seems to serve as a provocation for his philosophy of sexuality (as developed in several essays in *Philosophical Culture*). In short, Simmel’s aim is not just to recover the metaphysics of capitalist exchange underneath the materialist foundations of capitalist society but also to recover the even deeper psychological basis of sexual relations along with the redemptive potential of female culture.

Despite the differences in their views on the sources of value and the telos of history, Marx and Simmel are each concerned with how typical forms of conflict and competition, along with the personal moods and feelings that accompany them in the money economy, emerge from the fragmentation, polarization, and “reification” of social relationships. Each approaches strife and rivalry between groups and individuals in a capitalist world less as a natural and biological drive than as a social and cultural force that is both pacified and accelerated through markets and other forms of competition. However, in highlighting the personal dimensions, metaphysical underpinnings, and tragic implications of money transactions, Simmel focuses more on the cultural and experiential dynamics of technological progress while Marx emphasizes the structural and political consequences of class conflict.

In Chapter 2 of the *Philosophy of Money*, Simmel argues that money makes a “claim upon society” as a whole. By this he means that the value of money ultimately turns on the social functions it serves rather than on the materials that make it up: “Money has value not on account of *what it is*”, he argues, “but on account of *the ends that it serves*” (PM: 200, my emphasis). As new relationships and expanding spheres of interaction emerge out of older customs and narrower transactions, simple exchanges between two parties tend to be realized through a “superindividual” third factor, such as the economic community as a whole or the government as its representative. When currency is minted by the state, and insofar as members of the larger community have trust in the security of exchanges, the significance of money tends to reach beyond the direct line of contact between the parties of any given transaction. To elaborate on this crucial point, Simmel refers to the common saying that money is “a claim upon society [*eine Anweisung auf die Gesellschaft*]”. As he goes on to point out, “money appears, so to speak, as a bill of exchange from which the name of the drawee is lacking, or alternatively, which is guaranteed rather than accepted” (PM: 176; Simmel 1989: 213). His use of the German term *Anweisung* here is suggestive, since it implies an analogy between the social function of money in general and the “claim” someone makes for a debt or a reward, or the “instruction” one gives to make a payment or redeem a remittance. By extension, the beneficiary of a money transaction is not ultimately personal or easily identifiable, but rather a collective actor and often an anonymous entity. Money is therefore an “order” or a “claim

upon society” in the sense that the market, the state, or some other collective draws upon the relatively anonymous trust of social members. Public and private institutions guarantee the credibility of money transactions even when the offer of exchange is not accepted by individuals or completed in every instance.

Marx elaborates on this point in similar terms in “The Results of the Immediate Process of Production”, the unpublished draft of a chapter from *Capital* (which Simmel would not have been aware of). He notes that money is a claim upon society in the sense that capital “formally subsumes” not just labour but life itself, and thus insofar as capital potentially subjects the whole of existence to its command. Both Marx and Simmel conclude that the value of money derives more from its *social function* than from its *material substance*. In a statement reminiscent of Marx’s comments on the fetish-character of commodities and interest-bearing capital, Simmel argues that money materializes social relations by making them appear as relations between things, that is, by subsuming them in a process of reification: “money is the reified [or embodied: *verkörperte*] function of being exchanged; [...] the reification [or materialization: *zur Substanz gewordene*] of the pure relationship between things as expressed in their economic motion” (PM: 175; Simmel 1989: 211). The philosophical or metaphysical significance of money therefore consists in how money appears to transcend or even erase the presence of people by reducing the differences between them, along with the perceptible nuances and discernible pecu-

liarities between things, to a common denominator – their price or cash value.

In theory, all goods and every human being can be assigned a numerical value and then compared, calculated, and considered equivalent. In practice, as both Simmel and Marx observe, there is a trend against the use of hard cash in modern commerce, a tendency that is unavoidable because no amount of precious metals could ever keep up with the steady increase in the volume and velocity of transactions. When everything and everyone can be viewed and assessed in terms of abstract monetary values, the functions of money as the measure and means of exchange come to outweigh the material basis of money as a physical substance and store of value. As Simmel formulates this key point: “The functional value [*Funktionswert*] of money exceeds its value as substance [*Substanzwert*] the more extensive and diversified are the services it performs and the more rapidly it circulates” (PM: 142; Simmel 1989: 158). To be sure, in order for the social functions of money to be fulfilled, some material substance is always necessary, if only in the form of an operation performed in the head or by the hand (as Marx would argue), an inscription on a piece of paper, or a mathematical formula programmed into a machine (as we now see with the rise of crypto-currencies). In any case, the work of subjective and objective valuation in a modern money economy – of weighing and balancing supplies or accumulating and transporting resources, and so on – increasingly and ineluctably depends upon *the symbolic processes of measuring, counting, and converting values*.

The cultural and philosophical implications of this process of “valuation” and “transvaluation” are far-reaching and profound. One of the commentators who has elaborated on the implications of Simmel’s thesis that “money is a claim upon society” in an especially illuminating way is Nigel Dodd. Dodd notes that the logic of money entails a claim upon “varying modes of shared existence and experience”, so that even apparently non-commercial interactions can indirectly take on a financial character (Dodd 2014: 386). Not only do money transactions presuppose certain psychological habits of thought, relations of trust, and social institutions that guarantee their legitimacy but money itself seems to have a social life of its own. Metal, paper, or even so-called electronic currencies – not to mention barter and virtual procedures for recording and redeeming debts – tend to coexist with and even reinforce rather than replace each other. Money exercises agency beyond the actions or actors that make use of it, and money exchanges are never completely bound to the locations where they take place. There has never been a pure realm of territorially bounded currencies, since “state currencies have intermingled with other monetary forms for as long as they have been in circulation” (Dodd 2014: 212). For this reason, money often serves as an agent of deterritorialization and globalization by facilitating commerce and communication across national frontiers. Financial crises both in Simmel’s day and in our own reveal this social life of money, that is, “the complex and dynamic configuration of social, economic, and political relations on which money depends” (Dodd 2014: 386). Such crises expose the positive func-

tions of money by enabling the circulation and exchange of people and products, but at the same time they also show us *what money is not*: “that is to say, it is not an objective entity whose value is independent of social and political relations” (Dodd 2014: 386).

In any case, the double aspect of money – its “heads or tails” character – as a matter of both subjective and objective (trans)valuation emerges from a process involving a mix of chance and necessity. In this sense, money is a material medium facilitating social interactions that take on the form of a thing that seems to have a life of its own. In Marx’s terms, money is the prevailing form that capital takes in subsuming labour and life to the form and logic of exchange-value. In Simmel’s dazzling descriptions of “the style of life” in the final chapter of the *Philosophy of Money*, the implications of this argument are graphically illustrated in terms of how means are turned into ends through the endless pursuit of merchandise and money (PM: 433-518). “The intensity of modern economic conflicts in which no mercy is shown”, he observes, “is [...] unleashed by direct interest in money itself, [...] where the deadly antagonistic competitor of today is the cartel ally of tomorrow” (PM: 438). Capitalism transforms conflict into competition and extends competition from the economic realm of industry and commerce into every aspect of modern life. Love and sport, education and the arts, professional work and playful encounters are subject to the rule of competition, if not also to the claims of the money economy and the logic of capital.

With the expansion and intensification of trade, Simmel continues, things that at first sight appear to be far away or too minuscule to be perceived are increasingly brought into the field of human experience and awareness. The disruption in everyday perceptions induced by the confusing bustle of money exchanges can have real and disturbing effects on the individual, such as the break-up of the family, the dissolution of the psyche, and a pervasive hypersensitivity to every stimulus coming from the outside: “The money economy reinforces and refines modern tendencies towards the increase and diminution of distance, the pathological symptoms of which are ‘agoraphobia’: the fear of coming into too close a contact with objects, a consequence of hyperaesthesia, for which every direct and energetic disturbance causes pain” (PM: 480). At the global end of the scale, commerce can have far-reaching effects on the integration of social, economic, and political life: “only by means of money is it possible for a German capitalist and also a German worker to be actually involved in a ministerial change in Spain, in the profits of African gold mines, and in the outcome of a South American revolution” (PM: 482). As distances between people and places break down, remote relationships become more valuable and personal connections tend to become less meaningful. Human life as a whole is alienated to its core and brought to the edge of an existential crisis of identity: “The human being has thereby become distanced from itself; an insuperable barrier of media, technical inventions, abilities and enjoyments has been erected between humanity and its most distinctive and essential being” (PM: 489; Simmel 1989: 630). Overwhelmed by this experience of

alienation, we may feel as if the meaning of our existence has become so remote that we risk losing our sense of purpose altogether, or that we only regain an appreciation for the genuine meaning of life through a perpetual search for the new and an urgent struggle for the different.

If money facilitates the conquest of space, Simmel argues, it does so by accelerating the tempo of life. As Marx writes in his *Grundrisse* notebooks, the tendency of capital is ultimately *the conquest of space by time*, and thus “in the final analysis, all economics can be reduced to an economics of time” (Marx 1977: 362). In Simmel’s first publication on the philosophy of money which he incorporated into the book’s final pages (PM: 491-517), “The Significance of Money for the Rhythm of Life”, he argues that money transactions throw the spatial symmetries of social and personal relationships into disarray and upset the regular rhythms of ordinary life. The telegraph and the telephone redefine our normal sense of the speed or slowness of communication so that a message that once seemed to take an eternity now seems to arrive miraculously in an instant (or vice versa!). Not only does money seem to bring *here* and *there* into closer proximity, but it also appears to make the *here* disappear altogether. And not only does money accelerate the pace of modern life, it also defines time itself as absolute motion to the point where distinct sequences of time blur together or appear to occur simultaneously.

The pocket watch and the clock likewise alter our perception of duration by breaking down the flow of time into its components: “Like the determination of abstract value by money, the

determination of abstract time by clocks provides a system for the most detailed and definite arrangements and measurements that imparts an otherwise unattainable transparency and calculability to the contents of life, at least as regards their practical management” (PM: 450). The rhythm of both work life and domestic life now becomes tightly calculated and meticulously controlled in ways that were almost unknown or unnoticed in previous periods of history: “The changing requirements of objective circumstances and the mood of the day [...] already indicate how much the rhythm of mealtimes, and its opposite, corresponds to the rhythm of work” (PM: 495-96). As if to extend this analogy between capital or labour time and everyday or lived time, Simmel notes how the roundness of the conventional clock and the cyclical motion of its hands matches the roundness of coins, which symbolizes how transactions can “roll” at a certain pace and intensity or be “rounded off” as the occasion requires, but always in the interests of a speedy and more efficient conclusion (PM: 512-13). In short, “there is no more striking symbol of the completely dynamic character of the world than that of money” (PM: 510).

Coda on Money-Capital as Pure Power: Back to Marx... via Simmel!

In contrast to the posthumous notoriety of Marx’s *Capital*, the *Philosophy of Money* may not have had the popular appeal or scholarly recognition that Simmel had hoped for, and for the most part it did not generate the innovative studies of modern

culture among his contemporaries that he had envisioned. Nevertheless, the last chapter on “The Style of Life” did have a significant influence on several of his students, among them the young Hungarian philosopher and literary theorist Georg Lukács who attended Simmel’s lectures and Sunday salons in Berlin before moving to Heidelberg to study with Max Weber. Lukács cites a key passage from this chapter in his classic essay “Reification and the Consciousness” in *History and Class Consciousness* published in 1922, which can be read as an appeal to theorists and activists to return to Marx by way of Simmel. In this passage, Simmel is elaborating on the contradictory character of money as the reification of the general form of all life in a capitalist world, and as the model by which things derive significance from their relationships to one another and even become incorporated into each individual’s innermost identity: “These counter-tendencies, once started, may press forward to an ideal of completely pure separation in which all the material contents of life become increasingly objective and impersonal, so that the remainder that cannot be reified [*der nicht zu verdinglichende Rest*] becomes all the more personal, all the more the indisputable property of the self” (PM: 474; Simmel 1989: 652; quoted in Lukács 1971: 156-57). Here Simmel emphasizes how the impersonal and generic style of life promoted by the capitalist economy pushes the individual to resist being ground down into a thing among other things and to strive to preserve what is most intimate or personal to one’s inner sense of self.



Figure 2: Ideal Typewriter, ca. 1900

Perhaps reflecting on the personal meaning of his own scene of writing, Simmel goes on from this remark to consider how the typewriter produces mechanically uniform letters and thus seems to convey the pure, ideal contents of writing more efficiently than the contingencies of handwritten manuscripts (see Figure 2). Texts seem to allow or even compel us to avoid all personal, idiosyncratic, original, and creative modes of expression, he suggests, which then become all the more jealously guarded (PM: 474-75; cf. Kittler 1999: 183-98). In citing this passage, Lukács extends this general insight a step further to consider how the search for authentic selfhood may end up internalizing the impersonal, objectified, and reified character of capitalist culture which then gives a person's identity a sense of security and unshakable value. Following Marx, Lukács interprets the compulsion to reduce all personal and social relation-

ships to the terms of standardized economic exchanges from the standpoint of the modern proletariat, for whom “the unexplained and inexplicable facticity of bourgeois existence as it is here and now acquires the patina of an eternal law of nature or a cultural value enduring for all time” (Lukács 1971: 157). This Marxist perspective informs his argument that both theoretical critique and revolutionary practice are needed to rub away the illusory “patina” of bourgeois self-identity, as if to brush off its natural and unchangeable character like an opaque film accumulating on the surface of a coin. Only when social classes reimagine and resist this ideological worldview can they understand that what appears to be an unchangeable natural fact about their own place in the larger world is actually a cultural and historical process they can change and control.

As Lukács reminds us, Marx’s and Simmel’s reflections on how money mediates relations of power and wealth in the modern world do not just apply to the social and political realities that prevailed a century ago. They also shed light on the soft forms of stratification, surveillance, and social control that have become even more evident today. The cultural and ideological power of consumer advertising and financial markets in contemporary capitalist societies largely consists in projecting a kind of “virtual social life” that does not seem to be grounded in the lived practices or actual experiences of real people (Arvidsson 2016). Banks and marketing firms are lucrative machines of capital accumulation and financial speculation not just because of the goods and services they sell but also because they generate symbolic and material profits by predicting prices, influencing

values, and promoting certain ways of thinking and acting over others. In short, their power lies in making a claim on society and in subsuming life, leisure, and labour under the rule of capital.

In the journal Simmel kept in his final years he characterizes money as the ultimate symbol of “the inconceivable unity of being”, as if to evoke the worldview that Marx (in the *Grundrisse*) imagined was emerging under the sign of capital as “*le précis de toutes les choses*”:

Money is the only cultural formation that is *pure* power, that has fully eliminated material supports from itself, in that it is absolutely pure symbol. To this degree, it is the most characteristic among all the phenomena of our time, when dynamism has gained command of all theory and practice. The fact that it is *pure* relationship (and thus likewise characteristic of our time) without including any of the content of the relationship does not contradict this. For in reality, power is nothing but relationship (Simmel 2010: 186).

If we read this passage as a comment on our own times, we might observe that the money economy and its culture industries promote subtle forms of commodification, financialization, and operationalization that shape every relationship and define the very texture, rhythm, and style of modern existence. Of course, money can never be completely free of all material supports, although its functionality projects an image of pure power by stamping all relationships with its own distinctly symbolic character. Everything that seems to be singular or secure about each person can be subjected to the general law of economic and cultural value, relieving all forms of association and

individuation of their autonomy and converting them into mere instances of a generic type, corporate brand, or commercial logo. The capitalist system of the money economy thus intensifies the desperate subjectivism of modern times even as it finds an objective home in the virtual and actual structures of the workaday world.

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