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RATIONALITY – CULTIVATION – VITALITY

Simmel on the Pathologies of Modern Culture

Arthur Bueno[1]

ABSTRACT

This paper reconstructs Georg Simmel's writings on money and modernity with a view to outlining a multi-layered diagnosis of the pathologies of modern culture. The resulting framework allows for the distinction of three different perspectives, each of them based on a specific philosophical anthropology and presenting a distinctive assessment of the potentials and problematic features of modern life. In Simmel's oeuvre, the pathologies of culture are understood as (1) irrational (from the perspective of rational teleological action); (2) alienating (from the perspective of subjective cultivation); and (3) mechanistic (from the perspective of trans-subjective vitality).

KEYWORDS

Money, Modernity, Social pathology, Philosophical anthropology, Neurasthenia, Critique

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RACIONALIDADE – CULTIVO – VITALIDADE
Simmel sobre as patologias da cultura moderna

RESUMO

Este artigo reconstrói os escritos de Georg Simmel sobre o dinheiro e a modernidade com o objetivo de desenvolver um diagnóstico multifacetado das patologias da cultura moderna. Tal reconstrução permite a distinção de três perspectivas, cada uma delas fundada em uma antropologia filosófica específica e apresentando uma avaliação diversa dos potenciais e dos aspectos problemáticos da vida moderna. Na obra de Simmel, as patologias da cultura são entendidas como: (1) irracionais (da perspectiva da ação teleológica racional); (2) alienantes (da perspectiva do cultivo subjetivo); e (3) mecanicistas (da perspectiva da vitalidade transsubjetiva).

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Dinheiro, Modernidade, Patologia social, Antropologia social, Neurastenia, Crítica

Introduction[2]

As we celebrate Georg Simmel's work on the 100th anniversary of his death, the occasion presents itself for a

[2] A first version of this article was presented at the workshop "Recognition and Socialism" (Goethe University Frankfurt, July 18, 2014), on the occasion of Axel Honneth's 65th birthday. I would like to thank him and all the participants of this event for their comments and criticisms. I am also grateful to Hartmut Rosa, Klaus Lichtblau, Sergio Miceli and to several members of the Max Weber Center with whom the paper was discussed. This work was generously supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq).

renewed discussion on its relevance for contemporary social and philosophical thought. Particularly significant in this regard are his essays on money and modern culture: not only was this a central topic in Simmel's oeuvre – one with which he engaged throughout his entire career, from the late 1880s to the late 1910s –, but his analyses also prove to be especially pertinent for the understanding of current social processes. Written more than one hundred years ago, Simmel's arguments on money and modernity can seem strangely familiar to those who read them today: one may, indeed, come to sense a strong affinity between the experiences addressed in his "phenomenologically precise description of the modern way of life" (Habermas 1996 [1983]: 410) and contemporary forms of psychological malaise. Our society, as Simmel's, can be seen as marked by the widespread occurrence of "feelings of tension, of expectation, of unresolved urgency," the perception that the pace of life has been accelerated, the continuous and never exhausted quest for satisfaction – in tandem with equally frequent experiences of "deadly boredom and disappointment" and the impression "that the core and meaning of life slips through our fingers again and again, that definitive satisfactions become ever rarer, that all the effort and activity is not actually worthwhile" (Simmel 1997 [1889]: 236; 1997 [1896]: 251, 249). These affective states, widely addressed today with terms such as depression and burnout (see Ehrenberg 1998; Honneth 2002; Rosa 2011; Neckel and Wagner 2013), were then summarized under the notion of "neurasthenia," a social psychological condition marked by the oscillation between

urgency and exhaustion, saturation and insufficiency, "hyperesthesia" and "anesthesia" (Simmel 1992 [1896]: 214).

It was experiences like these that Simmel mostly sought to address in his writings on the money economy and on what came to be designated as the pathologies of modern culture. It would be misleading, however, to approach these texts as if they formed a fully coherent whole (see Geßner 2003; Levine 2008). Even if a number of thematic and conceptual continuities can be recognized, from the 1889 article "On the Psychology of Money" to the 1918 essay on *The Conflict of Modern Culture*, important modifications come to the fore as soon as one takes note of the ways in which Simmel, either explicitly or implicitly, assessed the social tensions of his time. Whereas in his first essays the ambivalences of modern (economic) life could still be likened to "the mythical spear that is itself capable of healing the wounds it inflicts" (Simmel 1997 [1896]: 255), the same tendencies were later evoked in less hopeful terms as the "paradoxes," "dissonances" or the "tragedy" of culture (Simmel 1997 [1908]: 44, 45; 1997 [1911-12]: 66) and came to be portrayed even more critically in his last writings as "internal contradictions" or "pathologies" leading to a widespread crisis (Simmel 1997 [1917]: 91, 92).

Yet these modifications in Simmel's perspective are not only connected to the different valuations placed on the conflicts of modernity, but also to significant reformulations in the epistemological and metaphysical foundations of his thought. Indeed, several attempts have been made to divide his oeuvre into distinct philosophical phases – the most notable of which is the differentiation between a positivist, a neo-Kantian, and a vitalist

period. Such kind of undertaking has, however, been proven difficult to substantiate, given precisely the lines of continuity that run through Simmel's work.[3] Taking these debates into account but without aiming to provide a definitive answer to them, this article sets out to accomplish a more modest task: it will argue that, in the case of Simmel's writings on money and modernity, a tripartite periodization can in fact be discerned. More specifically, I claim it possible to distinguish in his oeuvre three general approaches to modern culture – summarized here under the terms *rationality*, *cultivation*, and *vitality* –, each of which relies on a particular philosophical anthropology[4] and presents a distinctive analysis of the potentials and problematic features of modernity.

This differentiation between three accounts of what can be designated – following Simmel's late work – as the pathologies of modern culture is not only intended as a contribution to the ongoing discussions on the periodization of his oeuvre. To the extent that these approaches offer different responses to the same task of providing a diagnosis of modernity, the transitions between them do not represent mere changes in perspective, but rather reactions to and further developments of his precedent views. This allows one to take such accounts, from a reconstructive standpoint, as highlighting three distinct dimensions of the

[3] See, among others: Frischeisen-Köhler 1919; Spykman 1925; Coser 1956; Landmann 1958; Dahme 1981; Freund 1981; Vandenberghe 2001; Cantó-Milà 2005; Levine 2012; Podoksik 2016; Fitzi 2016.

[4] One could equally claim that, more than a particular philosophical anthropology, each of these periods also puts forward a different metaphysics (see Harrington and Kemple 2012). In this paper, however, I will mostly focus on the anthropological underpinnings of Simmel's diagnoses of modernity.

pathologies of culture and hence as mutually complementary endeavors.

Rationality

A crucial feature of Simmel's first essays on money and modern life is the notion of *teleological action*. In writings such as "On the Psychology of Money," "Money in Modern Culture" and in large portions of *The Philosophy of Money*, Simmel's analyses are developed on the basis of a philosophical anthropology according to which the human being is capable of using certain means for reaching his or her ends. This is already made clear in the opening lines of "On the Psychology of Money," where he advances two parallel distinctions between dimensions of theoretical consciousness and of practical activity: just as the "solid" sensory facts of our experience differ from the "fluid" causal connections by means of which they are ever more deeply grasped, the "solid" ultimate goals of our will diverge from the "fluid" means by which we seek to achieve them. The discovery of new facts and the transformation of ultimate goals occur at a relatively slow pace; but the representation of causes (and the causes of these causes) as well as the acquisition of means (and the means for these means) are caught up in continuous movement. According to Simmel, those "fluid" modes of theoretical consciousness and practical activity develop hand in hand, forming together a process of simultaneous *foundation* and *elevation* of the "teleological building" (Simmel 1997 [1889]: 233). In this context, then, human action is understood as purpo-

sive (*Zweckhandeln*) and the development of means, along with the deepening of causal consciousness – i.e. the expansion of knowledge and mastery over nature –, constitute the core of what Simmel calls "the progress of culture" (Simmel 1997 [1889]: 233).

Cultural development is thereby defined as an expansion of the teleological chain, i.e. an increase of institutions through which certain ends can be attained, at least indirectly, "when the disproportion between that which the individual wants and that which he can achieve as an individual requires detours which only the general community can make passable" (Simmel 1997 [1889]: 234). In the third chapter of *The Philosophy of Money*, this framework is further developed by way of a distinction between the means and the tool: while the former is seen to consist in a given, passive object that can be used to reach certain goals, the latter is produced by human action and so has purposes of its own. The tool is both passive and active – it is the *enhanced* means. Furthermore, it does not only concern material production, but encompasses a wide range of institutions (the state, legal systems, religious cults, etc.) that can serve as extensions of the teleological chain. What Simmel thus proposes is a *technical* understanding of culture and its institutions, broadly conceived of as a set of tools (Simmel 1989 [1900-07]: 254ff.).

Of all social institutions, however, money is the one that displays the tool in its purest form. Whereas the state, legal systems and religious cults maintain a certain proximity to specific purposes and hence may come to be perceived as ends in themselves, the monetary means has no substantial connection with

the aims it helps to achieve. It is completely indifferent to other objects and distances itself from them at the very moment it is used to obtain them. Money constitutes the *absolute tool*: on the one hand, it rejects any determination external to teleology; on the other, it remains unaffected by any singular purpose and presents itself as an irrelevant crossing point. In Simmel's teleological anthropology, therefore, money is taken as a most characteristic element of human experience: from purposive action to the means, from the means to the tool, from the tool to money, each link in this chain expresses on a higher level the potentials inscribed in the previous ones. Each of them *symbolizes* more typically what is properly human: man is the animal "that sets purposes," "the indirect being," the one "that produces tools," the being that exchanges with money (Simmel 1989 [1900/07]: 264-265).

It is from this perspective that modernity can be seen as a historical epoch marked by the development of a specific type of freedom, one that finds in the money economy its most radical form. For Simmel, the fact that money consists in an absolute tool is precisely what made it a powerful driving force in the increase of social objectivity and corresponding expansion of personal subjectivity that characterize modern society (Simmel 1997 [1896]; 1989 [1900/07]: ch. 4; see 1989 [1890]: ch. 3). On the one hand, by virtue of its objective and abstract nature, money produces a *detachment* between the elements it connects. In European history from the Middle Ages to modern times, the monetary means progressively slipped in as an "insulating layer" between property, personality and the social circle, breaking the

local and immediate ties that previously bound them (Simmel 1997 [1896]: 245). On the other hand, the same process that detached people and things from each other was also responsible for creating renewed and extremely strong *connections* among them: due to its lack of character and its "colorlessness," money allows for the joint action of individuals and groups who might, for all the rest, pronouncedly emphasize their differences (Simmel 1997 [1896]: 245). The peculiar combination of (personal) distance and (impersonal) connection embodied by money is hence the basis for associations, such as corporations and unions, that bring together the interests of their members while maintaining a reservation with regard to their personal differences. The development of the modern economy, precisely because it relies on an absolute tool, enables the formation of social units that are more comprehensive, objective and independent with regard to the personal properties of those who take part in them.

For the individual, this process has consequences that point to apparently opposite directions (see Lohmann 1993). On the one hand, precisely the increase in social objectification promoted by the money economy allows for a greater openness for the development of individuality and personal independence: monetary remuneration can serve in several contexts as a guarantee of some measure of individual freedom, since one does not offer in return the totality of one's self but only the impersonal results of one's work. On the other, the ambiguity of this kind of freedom is revealed in the example, mentioned by Simmel, of the peasant who sells his land. Such a process establishes, indeed, a

new type of freedom: with money in hand, one can convert the same amount of value into many different things, while the possession of an object always implies a relatively fixed form which makes its owner dependent on the conditions of its conservation. However, precisely this might signify "a vapidity of life and a loosening of its substance" (Simmel 1997 [1896]: 248). Monetary freedom consists in *negative freedom*: it dissolves what was fixed and substantial and hence breaks with old dependencies; but it puts nothing in its place, leaving an empty and in itself meaningless space. The soil, in contrast, represented much more for the peasant than its economic value: beyond the field of *pure possibilities* embodied by money, it provided an opportunity for "useful action, a center of interests, a practical reality giving life direction" (Simmel 1997 [1896]: 259). It contained something "substantial," priceless, that money, with its absence of character, cannot properly replace.

From the negative character of this form of freedom, grounded on the sheer expansion of abstract possibilities, follows a paradoxical type of teleological action that Simmel saw as widely present in modern culture. In monetary relations, more than anywhere else, is made visible the phenomenon of a "psychological interruption of the teleological series" or "colonization [*Überwucherung*] of ends by means" (Simmel 1997 [1889]: 235; 1997 [1896]: 245): namely, a process whereby certain means become ends in themselves to the extent that the original goals appear distant enough to be, so to speak, forgotten in practice. Due to a psychological dynamic that Simmel called the "principle of conserving energy" (Simmel 1997 [1889]: 235; 1989 [1890]:

ch. 6), the individual tends to concentrate upon the immediately present step of the teleological process, while the more remote ultimate end sinks away from consciousness. As a consequence, the value that a means originally held only in trust for the end to be achieved is autonomized and a mere mediating element comes to be perceived as an ultimate goal.

This is a general phenomenon characteristic of modern culture as a whole, constituting an element of irrationality inherent to the very rationalization of culture: the more intricate and elaborate the technique of all domains of life becomes, "the greater [the] danger is of getting stuck in the labyrinth of means and thereby forgetting the ultimate goal" (Simmel 1997 [1896]: 250). In many different areas of modern culture, "for countless people, the perfection of technology in their activities has become such an end in itself that they completely forget the higher ends which all technology is only supposed to serve" (Simmel 1997 [1889]: 235). The greatest example of this phenomenon is money: nowhere else the psychological conversion of a mere means into an ultimate end has become so radically evident; "never has a value which an object possesses only through its convertibility into others of definitive value been so completely transferred into a value itself" (Simmel 1997 [1889]: 235). It is as an advanced stage of this process that the idea may arise that all happiness is linked to the possession of money, which thereby emerges as "the absolute goal, the purpose of all human aspirations, the only one which it is possible in principle to strive for at any moment" (Simmel 1997 [1896]: 251). The absolute tool becomes, then, the absolute end.

The most striking examples of this process were developed in *The Philosophy of Money* through a psychological typology of the greedy, the miserly, the squanderer, the ascetic poor, the cynical, and the blasé (see Simmel 1989 [1900/07]: ch. 3). However, the basic assumptions of such a teleological understanding of money's paradoxes were already presented in concise form in Simmel's first essay on the topic:

> It is interesting [...] to see how this psychological interruption of the teleological series appears not only in direct greed and miserliness, but also in its apparent opposite, the pleasure in simply spending money as such, and finally in pleasure in the possession of as many things as possible from whose specific usefulness and the reason for which they are produced, one does not profit, but which one just wishes to 'have'. [...] Herein are the stages of the teleological process: the rational [*vernünftig*] ultimate goal is, indeed, only the enjoyment from the use of the object; the means to it are: first, that one has money, second that one spends it, and third that one possesses the object. Purposive consciousness can stop at any one of these three stages and constitute it as an end in itself; and in fact, so forcibly, that each of its three components can degenerate into manias (Simmel 1997 [1889]: 235).

It thus becomes clear how the various forms of psychological interruption of the teleological series can lead to that oscillation between feelings "of tension, expectation, of unresolved urgency" and of "deadly boredom and disappointment" which Simmel designated with the notion of *neurasthenia* and viewed as a fundamental feature of modern life (Simmel 1997 [1889]:

236; 1997 [1896]: 251).[5] Where money – "the unremovable wheel," the pure form of movement – becomes the absolute goal to which everyone aspires, providing "the modern person with a continuing spur to activity;" where the excessive expansion of our technique of life prompts the impression that "the main event, the definitive one, the actual meaning and the central point of life and things" is always yet to come – one cannot but experience those "feelings, apathetic and so modern, that the core and meaning of life slips through our fingers again and again, that definitive satisfactions become ever rarer, that all the effort and activity is not actually worthwhile" (Simmel 1997 [1896]: 251, 249).

In this context, all those phenomena presented as instances of the colonization of ends by means are understood as deviations from rational action due to the workings of teleological action itself. The notion of rationality hence constitutes, in Simmel's first essays, the positive counterpart to the paradoxical features of modern culture and the criterion according to which they can be designated as problematic. The content of such a notion remains, however, largely implicit and insufficiently conceptualized. Simmel's analyses in "On the Psychology of Money" and "Money in Modern Culture" presume that a rational economic action is one that culminates in the consumption of an

[5] The view of modernity as marked by an oscillation between feelings of hyperesthesia and anesthesia is central not only to Simmel's essays on money, but also to other of his writings, in which particular cultural and aesthetic phenomena of his time are addressed. See Simmel 2005 [1890]; 2005 [1893]; 1997 [1895]; 1992 [1896]; 2005 [1896]; 1997 [1903]. On the concept of neurasthenia in Simmel's work, see Bueno 2013; Svartman and Bueno 2016.

object ultimately aimed at. But in *The Philosophy of Money* this definition itself will be considered untenable: from a purely teleological perspective, ultimate goals potentially recede to infinity, since each of them can always appear as a means to a further end (Simmel 1989 [1900/07]: ch. 3). It is not clear, therefore, on which basis it would be possible to actually distinguish between rational ends and irrational ones. Simmel's teleological framework can certainly indicate the paradoxical character of actions that aim at an object, such as money, which simply consists in an absolute tool; but such a perspective is not in a position to determine what are rational goals in the first place. Part of his later writings, however, can be read as a response to this problem, precisely in that they move away from an action-theoretical account and develop another one centered on the notion of subjective cultivation.

Cultivation

The action-teleological perspective will not be abandoned by Simmel and continues to play an important part in his later writings. In the sixth chapter of *The Philosophy of Money*, however, one can already discern the development of a second model of analysis and assessment of modernity, now based on a philosophical anthropology that puts forward a conception of culture in continuity with the German *Bildung* tradition (see

Simmel 1989 [1900/07]: 591ff.).[6] This shift towards the broader perspective of a philosophy of culture is outlined in the section on "The Concept of Culture" of his 1900 book and further pursued in essays such as "The Metropolis and Mental Life," "On the Essence of Culture," "The Future of Our Culture" and to some extent in "The Concept and Tragedy of Culture" (Simmel 1997 [1903]; 1997 [1908]; 1997 [1909]; 1997 [1911-12]; see also 2001 [1911]). In these writings, Simmel's previous arguments come to be embedded in a concept of culture which is no longer purely technical, insofar as its development is not grasped primarily as the expansion of institutional tools for rational action, but rather finds its basis in the notion of subjective cultivation (*Kultivierung*).

The starting point for this approach is still the notion of teleology. Crucial for Simmel's philosophy of culture is a preliminary distinction between two types of development: a natural one, consisting of "the purely causal development of initial inherent energies" of a certain being; and a cultural one, which comes into play when "teleological processes take over and develop these existing energies to a pitch that was quite impossible, in the nature of things, within the limits of their foregoing development" (Simmel 1997 [1908]: 41). At this point, therefore, the concept of culture remains identical to teleological activity,

[6] Even though Simmel's philosophy of culture only took shape in the 1900s, some of his previous writings already point towards that perspective. This is particularly conspicuous in his essay on "The Alpine Journey," which assesses the latter's implications for modern culture from the point of view of its "educative value" (*Bildungswert*), of "education [*Bildung*] in its deepest sense", that is, of how much one was able to "cultivate [*kultivieren*] their inner depths and spirituality when they visit the Alps" (Simmel 1997 [1895]: 220).

understood as the "use of natural circumstances through will and intelligence" (Simmel 1997 [1908]: 41).

The aim of Simmel's philosophy of culture is, however, precisely to go beyond the action-teleological scope of his previous essays on money and modernity. The transition between these two perspectives is provided by the foregrounding of the subject as agent and bearer of the cultural process. Even if it also relies on the distinction between a natural state and another one resulting from technical interventions, the new framework includes, moreover, the notion that modifications in individuals by virtue of teleological processes can occur either in line with, or in opposition to, their latent "*natural structural conditions or drives*" (*natürlichen Strukturverhältnissen oder Triebkräften*) (Simmel 1997 [1908]: 41). Both of these constitute cultural processes from an action-teleological perspective, but only the former – as Simmel now sees it – leads to subjective cultivation and hence to an actual progress of culture. In this account, cultural development is seen to consist in modifications due to teleological actions, but in such a way that leads the subject to "the consummation which is predetermined as a potential of its essential underlying tendency" (*der eigentlichen und wurzelhaften Tendenz seines Wesens*) (Simmel 1997 [1908]: 41).

This concept of culture furthermore implies that such a development does not occur in a purely subjective manner, but necessarily involves external objects – be they material or immaterial. "Neither what we are purely in ourselves [...], nor the fruits of the labors of humanity by which we are surrounded [...] can constitute the pinnacle of culture, but only the harmo-

nious improvement of the former by the fruitful inward assimilation of the latter" (Simmel 1997 [1909]: 102). Only the double process of *externalization* of subjective capacities into objective constructs, on the one hand, and *internalization* of cultural objects leading to the development of individual potentials, on the other, constitutes what Simmel now calls "the path of culture in its specific sense" (Simmel 1997 [1908]: 43). Cultivation is a subjective condition, but one which results from "a unique adaptation and teleological interweaving of subject and object" (Simmel 1997 [1908]: 43).

The specific contribution of the idea of cultivation to Simmel's cultural-philosophical approach is further clarified by means of an analogy to two ways of transforming the natural components of a tree: the first refers to the manufacture of a ship's mast from its trunk; the second consists in the cultivation of a wild tree, which in its natural state only produces hard and sour fruits, into an orchard that comes to provide edible ones. In the former case, the natural element is teleologically modified on the basis of *extrinsic* criteria: forms are added to it that do not reside "in the peculiar tendency of its essence" but rather originate from "a system of purposes alien [*fremden*] to its own predispositions" (Simmel 1997 [1908]: 41). In the latter, the cultivating work of the gardener "develops the potential dormant in the organic constitution of [the tree's] natural form, thus effecting the most complete unfolding of its own nature" (Simmel 1997 [1908]: 41). Transposed to human beings, this duality allows Simmel to distinguish between two kinds of relationship between purposive subjects and purposively formed

objects: one which, while developing subjects beyond the levels achievable by their purely natural forces, does so according to criteria and forms extrinsic to their inherent potentials; and another which results in the consummation of the subjects' latent predispositions.

Such a differentiation on the side of the subject also results in a duality on the side of the objects, which acquire different meanings and values depending on whether they result in subjective cultivation or not. It is not possible, however, to define a universal parameter for such a process: the "structural conditions or drives" of each subject establish possibilities of development that are always particular and irreducible to external criteria. Hence the need to distinguish between two types of meaning or value of objects: an objective one, given by the norms and hierarchies of each specialized cultural domain (art, science, ethics, economy, etc.); and a cultural (i.e. cultivating) one, associated with the contribution of a certain product to the development of the individual's inner *totality*, i.e. to "the harmony of its parts" (Simmel 1997 [1908]: 43). In contrast with the previous action-teleological approach, here the progress of culture cannot be simply equated with the growing rationalization and specialization of institutions. The "authentic cultural process," as Simmel now conceives it, only occurs "when such [objective] one-sided attainments are integrated into the soul in its entirety, [...] when they help to perfect the [subjective] whole *as a unity*" (Simmel 1997 [1908]: 44, 45; emphasis added).

These distinctions allow Simmel to reformulate his diagnosis of modern society in terms of an "atrophy of individual cul-

ture through the hypertrophy of objective culture" (Simmel 1997 [1903]: 184). As in his previous teleological perspective, the predicament of modernity is characterized here as an inherently ambivalent process. The enormous expansion and refinement of objective constructs makes, on the one hand, "life [...] infinitely easy for the personality in that stimulations, interests, uses of time and consciousness are offered to it from all sides;" the subject is thus provided with an ever-growing objective *potential* for cultivation. On the other hand, the fact that "life is composed more and more of these impersonal contents and offerings which tend to displace the genuine personal colorations and incomparabilities" makes it increasingly difficult for the subject to *actually* appropriate them for the sake of his or her own development (Simmel 1997 [1903]: 184). As a result, the "culture of things" is not only hypertrophied but also seemingly *autonomized* in relation to the "culture of persons:" with the constitution of a universe of things increasingly diverse and elaborate which individuals, for the most part, are unable to absorb or even to fully understand, cultural objectivity appears to "acquire the extent and coherence of a realm with its own kind of independent existence" that multiplies "as if in obedience to an inexorable fate indifferent to us" (Simmel 1997 [1909]: 101).

The "dissonances of modern life" and the "real cultural malaise of modern man" are thereby traced back to the discrepancy between a highly complex, seemingly autonomized objective realm and individuals who find themselves less and less "able to derive from the consummation of objects a consummation of their subjective lives" (Simmel 1997 [1908]: 45; 1997

[1909]: 102). This is not a situation that can be remediated by the creation and appropriation of ever more cultural products: "No increase in knowledge, literature, political achievements, works of art, means of communication or social manners can make good our deficiency. The possession of all these things does not, in itself, make a man cultured [*kultiviert*], any more than it makes him happy" (Simmel 1997 [1909]: 101). Yet, while being unable to keep up with the accelerated expansion of cultural objectivity, the subject also feels committed "to the task of increasing the elements of objective culture" and of appropriating the whole range of potentials they provide. The objective logic of cultural accumulation is thus converted into a subjective principle: modern individuals are then subordinated to an objective system of purposes that appears as "something alien [*fremd*], which does violence to them and with which they cannot keep pace" (Simmel 1997 [1909]: 102).

It is with reference to this diagnosis of cultural *alienation*[7] that Simmel now comes to understand that oscillation between urgency and apathy, insufficiency and saturation, hyperesthesia

[7] It is highly significant that Simmel understood his analysis of cultural alienation – before the publication of *The Paris Manuscripts* (in 1932) and of Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* (in 1923) – as an enlarged version of Marx's diagnosis: "The 'fetishistic character' which Marx attributed to economic objects in the epoch of commodity production is only a particularly modified instance of this general fate of the contents of our culture. These contents are subject to the paradox – and increasingly so as 'culture' develops – that they are indeed created by human subjects and are meant for human subjects, but follow an immanent developmental logic in the intermediate form of objectivity which they take on at either side of these instances and thereby become alienated [*entfremden*] from both their origin and their purpose" (Simmel 1997 [1911-12]: 70).

and anesthesia which he saw as a crucial feature of modern psychological life:

> The infinitely growing stock of the objectified mind makes demands on the subject, arouses faint aspirations in it, strikes it with feelings of its own insufficiency and helplessness, entwines it into total constellations from which it cannot escape as a whole without mastering its individual elements. There thus emerges the typical problematic condition of modern humanity: the feeling of being surrounded by [...] elements which have a certain crushing quality as a mass, because an individual cannot inwardly assimilate every individual thing, but cannot simply reject it either, since it belongs potentially, as it were, to the sphere of his or her cultural development (Simmel 1997 [1911-12]: 75).

Simmel's cultural-philosophical approach thus allows one to conceive of the problematic aspects of modernity in a different key. With the contrast between a form of development "in accordance with [the subject's] original inner essence" and one through forms that are "a purely external addition imposed by a system of purposes alien to its own predispositions" (Simmel 1997 [1908]: 41), a parameter is provided on the basis of which a given teleological process can be assessed as alienating or not. The "dissonances of modern life" are no longer primarily understood in terms of the irrationality of actions, but rather of the alienation produced by cultural processes which hinder the self-realization of the subject *qua* a totality of latent capacities. Yet there is a tendency in Simmel's philosophy of culture to conceive of the subject in essentialist terms, as having a particular "*original* inner essence" (Simmel 1997 [1908]: 41; emphasis added). Cultivation is understood as the development of a sub-

jective structure of potentials that are, indeed, socially modifiable, but nevertheless *naturally predisposed*. Precisely this aspect will, however, be modified in his later writings. Even if such a conception of the human subject was never completely abandoned by Simmel, the foregrounding of the notion of life in his subsequent essays brought into play a comprehension of collective vitality which goes beyond the limits of an original subjective essence and further expands the scope of his diagnosis of modernity.

Vitality

The growing importance of the notion of life in Simmel's writings of the 1910s leads to a further shift in his anthropological perspective, with significant consequences for the diagnosis of modern culture and the money economy. In essays such as "The Concept and Tragedy of Culture," "The Crisis of Culture," "The Change in Cultural Forms" and *The Conflict of Modern Culture*, one can recognize a combination of motives from the author's philosophy of culture with his own nascent metaphysics of life, advanced through dialogues with the works of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bergson and Goethe, among others (Simmel 1995 [1907]; 2003 [1912/18]; 2000 [1914]; 2010 [1918]). Whilst Simmel's engagement with the theme of life and related intellectual currents certainly predates the 1910s (Lichtblau 1984; Fitzi 2002; Bleicher 2007; Levine 2012), it was during this decade that the latter's influence came to decisively affect his diagnosis of modern culture. Just as the comprehension of culture *qua* cul-

tivation provided a broader framework than the concept of rational teleological action, the notion of life can be now seen as leading to an even wider account of the pathologies of modernity.

The implications of Simmel's emergent life-philosophy for his previous cultural-philosophical approach are particularly evident in "The Concept and Tragedy of Culture," an essay in which these two perspectives appear combined. One can then observe how the foregrounding of the notion of life affects the two poles that constituted the Simmelian conception of culture *qua* cultivation. With regard to *subjective* development, here, as before, the human psyche is considered as something more than its present condition: it contains at any given moment "a higher and more perfected state of itself preformed within itself," as if in "some invisible inner pattern" (Simmel 1997 [1911-12]: 55; 1997 [1908]: 42). Yet this potential state is no longer formulated in terms of a given set of interconnected capacities, as in the author's precedent philosophy of culture, but rather on the basis of a characteristic *uninterruptedness* of life – one that, Simmel now claims, is particularly well manifested in the experience of temporal continuity between past, present and future. Life "contains its past inside itself in an unmediated form," so that it "lives on according to its original content and not only as the mechanical cause of later transformations in consciousness" (Simmel 1997 [1911-12]: 55). And it extends towards the future in a way that "[t]he later form is present at every moment of existence [...] with a prefiguration and an inward necessity that cannot be compared, for instance, with the presence of the

expanded form in a compressed spring" (Simmel 1997 [1911-12]: 56).

Simmel's reformulation of his philosophy of culture from the perspective of a metaphysics of life also affects the *objective* side of cultural dynamics. As in the previous approach, this one equally relies on the notion that subjects create objective constructs which may become hypertrophied and seemingly autonomous in relation to those who brought them into existence. The problematic aspects of this process are, however, no longer simply understood in terms of the impairments that objective cultural development entails for the cultivation of the subject *qua* a totality of interconnected capacities. With the introduction of life-philosophical motives, the predicament of modernity comes to be grasped as an ongoing conflict between the *fluidity* of subjective life and the *solidity* of the objective forms in which it necessarily manifests itself. Art and law, religion and technology, science and morality are now conceived as possessing "the form [...] of immobility, of lasting existence, with which the spirit, having become an object in that way, opposes the flowing liveliness [*strömenden Lebendigkeit*] [...] of the subjective psyche" (Simmel 1997 [1911-12]: 55). In modern culture, the relation between these poles comes to be marked by a growing estrangement (*Fremdheit*), leading to "countless tragedies in this antagonism [...] between subjective life, that is restless but finite in time, and its contents which, once created, are immovable but timelessly valid" (Simmel 1997 [1911-12]: 55).

This shift in Simmel's philosophical anthropology from cultivation to life represents not only a transition from one level

of interpretation to another, but also a crucial change regarding the place of teleology in human life. Whereas in his philosophy of culture the notion of teleological action was already subordinated to the idea of cultivation, in his late writings this move is taken even further, so that the specificity of human life is now seen as lying rather in its *non-teleological* character. This is made especially clear in *The View of Life*. In line with the arguments previously developed in "The Concept and Tragedy of Culture," Simmel claims that lived experience is marked by a fundamental (temporal) continuity: i.e., the permanent extravasation (*Hineinleben*) of the past into the present – expressed in memory – and of the present into the future – manifested in will. The present is not a mere point in time, but rather immediately entangled with both the past and the future. This means, however, that the human being can no longer be simply characterized as a "goal-setting being" (Simmel 2010 [1918]: 7). The projection of a temporally distant goal implies that the latter stands as a fixed point, discontinuous with the present; yet precisely such a temporal fragmentation is now seen as a crucial feature of a *mechanistic* conception of life, which deals with its transformations in the same way as it does with the changes in a compressed spring. The teleological relation with the world is a mechanical one. Even if it might be efficient for the requirements of practice, thinking and acting in teleological terms results in a break with the characteristic continuity, the flowing vitality (*strömenden Lebendigkeit*), the permanent extravasation (*Hineinleben*) of life.

There is, however, a further restriction of teleology in *The View of Life*: one that unfolds not from what is *prior* to teleology,

but rather from what lies *beyond* it – namely, the autonomous cultural spheres that Simmel called "ideal worlds" and saw as outcomes of an "emancipation" from the teleology of life (Simmel 2010 [1918]: 30). These worlds originate from life's teleological dynamics and at the same time detach from it. Science, for example, emerges from knowledge originally acquired to reach practical purposes and therefore subjected to the teleology of life; but then comes to constitute an autonomous world within which what was only means to an end is emancipated and becomes, not an end in itself, but rather something "without purpose" (*zwecklos*) (Simmel 2010 [1918]: 28).[8] The specificity of the human being, as Simmel now sees it, does not lie in the capacity for rational teleological action, but rather in modes of experience that stand either *beneath* or *beyond* purposiveness:

> Viewed overall, man is the least teleological creature. At the one end of his existence he follows blind instincts that are no longer utterly purposive as with animals, but aberrant, disoriented, and, given the means that our teleology places at their disposal, destructive to the point of madness. At the other end of his existence he is elevated above all teleology. For him, teleology thus stands between those two poles [...] and only through its quantitative expansion and refinement can it evoke the illusion that man is a purposive creature (Simmel 2010 [1918]: 29).

[8] "Man has reached a level of existence that stands above purpose. It is his distinctive value that he can act without purpose. By this we mean only actions as wholes, though these may or must be teleologically constructed within themselves; that is, the particular action sequence is built of means that lead to one purpose, but the whole is not in turn situated in an overarching general teleology. Such sequences naturally do not fill life up completely; instead life is purposive in its largest parts [...]. Here and there, though, man lives in the category of the nonpurposive" (Simmel 2010 [1918]: 28).

Such a philosophical anthropology leads to the formulation of a specific conception of freedom, different than the ones which informed Simmel's previous approaches. As he now understands it, freedom does not arise from the overcoming of organic impulses and the establishment of a rational teleology. Due to its boundedness to a mechanism, the domain of the teleological is rather marked by a lack of freedom:

So far as [the human being] is such a [purposive] creature, he has no freedom, but is bound to what is merely a specially conditioned mechanism. We are free as pure creatures of impulse because there all counter-effort has vanished and we live *ex solis nostrae naturae*. And we are free in the ideal realms before which teleology ends. The domain of purposiveness is the middle range of human existence, precisely as it occupies the middle range between intention and result within a particular action-series (Simmel 2010 [1918]: 29).

From this perspective, the antithesis of freedom is not coercion, but rather purposiveness. "Freedom is a release, not from the *terminus a quo*, but from the *terminus ad quem*" (Simmel 2010 [1918]: 30) – it is *freedom from teleology,* freedom from the mechanism. At stake here, thus, is neither the negative liberty of the pure teleological possibilities opened up by money, nor the cultivating liberty of the subject who is able to develop its own latent potentials, but rather one that can be called, in Simmel's words, "artistic-vitalist" (Simmel 1995 [1916]: 165).[9]

[9] This is precisely the kind of freedom that Simmel identifies in Rembrandt's works of art. His depictions would indicate how "in the ideal image of each human being there dwells a freedom and self-esteem as soon as the moment, grasped in the picture, really grows out of the continuity of his life. This corresponds to the concept of freedom of

As these arguments indicate, the underlying parameter of Simmel's late assessment of human experience is no longer primarily the rationality of action, nor subjective cultivation, but rather the possibility of a non-mechanistic form of life. Such a perspective did not only take shape in a metaphysics (articulated in *The View of Life*) and a philosophy of art (developed in *Rembrandt*), but also came to decisively affect Simmel's diagnosis of modern culture, without having simply replaced the two previous models. In essays such as "The Crisis of Culture," "The Change in Cultural Forms" and *The Conflict of Modern Culture*, an overarching assessment of modernity is developed in which the life-philosophical perspective is applied to the totality of social life as well as presented in its entanglement with the action-teleological and cultural-philosophical approaches. A crucial feature of these writings derives from the historical context in which they emerged (see Watier 1996; Simmel 1999 [1917]). Published between 1916 and 1918, they display Simmel's diagnosis of modernity in its most acute form: the First World War was viewed by him as a moment of crisis in which the pathologies of culture reached their peak and, at the same time, as an occasion for the emergence of unforeseen reactions against them. Paradoxically, the outbreak of a destructive crisis would have opened up the possibility, even if temporary, of mitigating the very pathological dynamics that had led to it.

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his contemporaries: to exist and to act *ex solis suae naturae legibus*; something that comes into being, that has collected in itself the whole course of its development, and could develop and become intelligible precisely out of this" (Simmel 2005 [1916]: 104).

By addressing these mitigating dynamics, Simmel's late writings provide a sharper view of the three constitutive dimensions of the pathologies of culture and their respective counterpoints. He observes, first, how the colonization of ends by means was affected during the war: given the scarcity of food, money was deprived of its unlimited efficacy and revealed as an "in itself utterly powerless means" (Simmel 1997 [1917]: 98); it lost its capacity to operate as an absolute tool and therewith the possibility of being converted into an ultimate goal. Such a process meant not only the sudden "discovery that money is not what matters," but also, more generally, the reversal of a "sense of economic value which has been nurtured for centuries [...]: the idea that everything has its price, the evaluation of things purely in terms of their monetary value, skepticism regarding any values that cannot be expressed in terms of money" (Simmel 1997 [1917]: 97). The war crisis thus opened up, even if only for a moment, the possibility of perceiving things in their immediate, qualitative significance, and money in its lack of meaning. This could, Simmel hoped, lead to a "more sensitive, less blasé, [...] [even] more reverent" relationship with the objects that surround us (Simmel 1997 [1917]: 97-98).

Simmel also claimed that the hypertrophy of objective culture had been partially reversed during the war, to the extent that the latter contributed to reducing the gap between subjects and objects: on the battlefield, "the meaning and demands of life are focused on activity of whose value one is conscious without the mediation of any external things" (Simmel 1997 [1917]: 93). In comparison with other workers, especially those in factories,

the soldier of the First World War would have had more readily proven (i.e. cultivated) his personal strengths and abilities, establishing a relationship with the cultural apparatus that was "infinitely more vital" and less subject to the "marginalization of personal life by objective activity" (Simmel 1997 [1917]: 93). For Simmel, the war had thus provided, at least temporarily, the form of a reconciliation between "the individual and the totality, somehow mitigating the dualism between the individual as an end in himself and as a member of the totality" (Simmel 1997 [1917]: 93).

Finally, the war also had significant implications for a third pathology of culture: the mechanistic fragmentation of life into cultural domains and individual activities that develop in mutual independence and estrangement – in other words, its *lack of vitality*. In reaction to such an absence of a common "spirit" (which would "color everything that is created during a particular period by virtue of its unity of character"), Simmel claimed that in recent years, and especially during the war, cultural movements of all sorts were "suffused with a passionate vitality [*Lebendigkeit*] bursting forth as if from one common source of energy" (Simmel 1997 [1917]: 99). As a consequence, those forms that had become mechanically congealed and immune to life's creative commotion (*Bewegtheit*) were once again involved by its vital stream. This was for Simmel, for all its destructiveness, the positive significance of the war for the *form* of modern culture:

> The unprecedented enhancement and excitement in the lives of each and every one of us has also promoted this

> fusion, this coming together in one single stream. And, likewise, it will for a while give a new dynamic impetus [*Bewegtheit*] to the objective elements of culture, and thus new scope and encouragement to become reintegrated, to break out of that rigidity and insularity which had turned our culture into a chaos of disjointed individual elements devoid of any common style (Simmel 1997 [1917]: 100).

As these passages indicate, in Simmel's late writings the notion of life gradually takes on a *trans-subjective* meaning. Whereas in "The Concept and Tragedy of Culture" the focus was still the "flowing liveliness [...] of the *subjective* psyche" (Simmel 1997 [1911-12]: 55; emphasis added), his last essays rather point to a collective vitality whose surging dynamism draws individuals into one and same movement, located both *beyond* and *below* their subjectivities. It is from this perspective that the war, with all "its unifying, simplifying and concentrated force," could appear to Simmel as a defense of trans-subjective life against those forms that were mechanically estranged in relation to its dynamics (Simmel 1997 [1917]: 101). "The supreme concentration of energy pervading the life of an entire nation does not allow that independent consolidation of its diverse elements which, in peacetime, sets up these elements of culture as separate, mutually alien entities, each obeying only its particular individual laws" (Simmel 1997 [1917]: 99). At stake here is not simply the action-teleological consensus produced by the shared dangers of the war ("the common goal [...] [that has] given our people, as the sum total of its individuals, an unsuspected unity"). Even more crucial as a response to the mechanical fragmentation of modern life was, for Simmel, the intense feeling of

oneness, the fusional and somewhat indeterminate mood (*Stimmung*) which came to "permeate a multitude of spheres and [...] give, as it were, a more unified rhythm to their heartbeat" – making "all the diverse phenomena of culture [appear as] emanations or media, heartbeats or products of the process of life itself" (Simmel 1997 [1917]: 99).[10]

Conclusion

After having reconstructed Simmel's work on money and modernity from 1889 to 1918, I will now turn to the question of its current relevance. Not only can his writings on this topic be interpreted as having three distinct phases, but the author himself, in his last years, came to similarly conceive of the pathologies of culture in terms of three interconnected dimensions. Each of the approaches developed throughout his oeuvre can then be seen to provide a different contribution to the diagnosis of modern society. Referring to the irrational character of the conversion of mere technical possibilities into ends in themselves, Simmel's first model affirms as a condition for rational action that one keeps in mind the qualitative aspect of the *objects* ultimately aimed at. Addressing the alienating character of a hypertrophied objectivity that compels individuals to orient themselves by the mere accumulation of ever more cultural constructs, Simmel's second model suggests a mode of relationship to objective culture in which the qualitative peculiarity of the

[10] On the notion of "*Stimmung*" in Simmel's work and especially in *Rembrandt*, see Bueno 2019.

subject as a set of interconnected potentials constitutes the basis for his or her cultivation. Alluding to the mechanistic character of forms of life whose rigidity and insularity corresponds to a lack of affective unity, Simmel's third model points toward the qualitative experience of *collective* vitality associated with the involvement in a flowing, trans-subjective mood which comes to permeate a multitude of individuals and spheres.

All these dimensions of the pathologies of culture, as Simmel has emphasized, are crucially affected by the far-reaching development of the money economy in modernity. The progressive rationalization of institutional technologies that leads to a widespread colonization of ends by means; the enormous quantitative and qualitative development of cultural constructs that tend to submit individuals to the logics of a hypertrophied objective realm; the increasing rigidity and insularity of modern forms of life which come to be experienced as lacking in vitality – all these processes are propelled by, among other factors, the ongoing elevation of money to the status of an absolute tool; the domination of economic relations by the principle of unceasing expansion and accumulation; and the constitution of the modern economy as a realm mechanically estranged from life.

As indicated throughout this paper, Simmel's analysis of these processes proves crucial to the comprehension of those experiences of psychological malaise that he saw as symptoms of neurasthenia, and that we currently address with notions such as depression and burnout. Yet such a multi-layered diagnosis does not only allow one to distinguish between three dimensions of the pathologies of culture, but also points toward

three concepts of freedom advanced in modernity. In addition to the *negative freedom* associated with the multiplication of technical possibilities for action, addressed in Simmel's early writings, his second phase puts forward a conception of *freedom as self-realization* of the subject's latent potentials, while the third emphasizes a form of *artistic-vitalist freedom* bounded to the liberating experience of being immersed in a shared mood located both beneath and beyond subjectivity. It is in the form of complex – at times complementary, at times opposing, often paradoxical – entanglements between those pathological processes and types of freedom that, from a Simmelian perspective, the conflicts of modern culture can be seen to play out.

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