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## Simmel As Educator: On Individuality and Modern Culture<sup>i</sup>

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In his preface to The Philosophy of Money Simmel espouses a genre of speculative work--in later years he would name it 'philosophical sociology'--which offers general interpretations of history and society that empirical disciplines simply cannot provide, either because these disciplines are partial and incomplete or because they cannot encompass the required valuative emphases and integrative perspectives. This genre seems necessary because it deals with questions 'that we have so far been unable either to answer or to dismiss' (1978: 53).

Although valuable diagnoses of this sort have been produced by colleagues in our own time--such as Daniel Bell, Norbert Elias, Jürgen Habermas, Morris Janowitz, and Talcott Parsons--the classics of social theory remain a goldmine of such speculative conceptions. More particularly, every one of the classic authors offers models and metaphors with which to grasp the nature of that historically unprecedented social and cultural context which we typically gloss as 'modernity.'

Of the many ways to represent the classic takes on modernity, the interpretive schema I shall apply here sees them as advocates of a new kind of educational program. Their advocacy tends to proceed by means of a three-term argument. First, they analyze key features of the new order which seem to promote human welfare; second, they criticize certain features of the new order which seem to affect humanity adversely; and third, they propose some form of education which will serve to counteract these adverse features.

Thus, in the Essay on the History of Civil Society, Adam Ferguson, whom some have called the 'first sociologist,' defined modern civilization by its improvement of arts and sciences, its attainment of efficient administration, and its perfection of commercial practices. On the other hand, Ferguson also found this civilization marked by a regime of selfishness and luxury, overestimation of material wealth, and neglect of political participation and the public good. Ferguson offered his own work as an educational tract designed to cultivate the liberal spirit and stimulate devotion to public affairs, and therewith to counteract the corrupting tendencies of the modern commercial order.

Adam Smith likewise took the defining feature of modern societies to be their organization for commerce, and he hailed the division of labor as the key factor in raising the average standard of living of their members. On the other hand, Smith criticized the division of labor in industry for the way it cripples the mental faculties of laborers, making them 'as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become' (1965: 734). He indicted the division of labor for rendering people unfit for rational conversation and unsuited for making sensible judgments regarding private and public interests.

Consequently, Smith advocated a system of public education which would counteract the mind-numbing and narrowing effects of the division of labor with broadening and enriching experiences.

For Auguste Comte, the hallmarks of modernity included both the overthrow of prescientific belief systems and the diversification of social functions. While these developments vastly expand the cooperative domain of modern societies as well as their productive capacities, they lead to conditions of intellectual anarchy which threaten the viability of modern societies as consensual systems. In response, Comte advocated the development of a common curriculum based on the positive sciences for the new elites of modern societies, as well as a simplified set of scientifically-grounded beliefs to be disseminated to all their members.

Karl Marx located the great advances of the modern order in the astonishing productivity and internationalization made possible by the capitalist organization of production, and its correlative defects in the alienation of workers from the productive process. Despite passages which disparage efforts to change human consciousness through education, Marx at times signaled a need for new forms of consciousness as a means of overcoming the exploitative and alienating features of this system.

Herbert Spencer located the progressive aspect of modern societies in the extent to which they embodied functionally differentiated structures. The vulnerability of such an order lay in the tendency of functionaries to acquire vested interests in their specializations, and in the tendency of unenlightened activists to effect harmful interventions in complicated social realities. Although Spencer's general educational theory aimed at far more than the redress of such problems, he advocated the study of sociology as a resource to enhance the adaptive flexibility of modern citizens and to enable them to understand the complexities of natural processes so that they would avoid retrograde actions and pathological interventions.

Emile Durkheim rebutted Comte by arguing that modernity entailed such extensive specialization it was no longer plausible to base social solidarity on an extensive system of shared beliefs. Durkheim welcomed the modern order as a matrix of diversity, individualization, innovation, and societal interdependence. At the same time, he viewed its erosion of traditional norms and social obligations as a source of disorientation and pathological personal strivings. To counteract these pathologies, Durkheim advocated a system of education whose goal was to cultivate both intellectual autonomy and moral regulation.

For Max Weber, by contrast, the modern order entailed unprecedented levels of social coordination and regulation. The rationalization of business, law, and public administration vastly enhanced human instrumental capacities and the achievement of equality under the law; however, these processes of rationalization threatened to turn human actors into robots. To counter this, Weber advocated a strenuous process of 'education for judgment,' a process which prodded people to think critically for themselves and to escape the 'unreflective determination of social decisions by value habits and emotions built into public language' and conventional practice.<sup>ii</sup>

For John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, finally, one could say that they viewed the modern order as entailing unprecedented capabilities for rational discourse and public communication. On the other hand, they criticized contemporary society for not having developed the kinds of public consciousness needed for pluralistic urban communities. In response, they advocated new kinds of educational programs to cultivate habits of social cooperation and elevate discourse about public problems.

## I

Applying this interpretive schema to Simmel's widely-scattered comments on the modern order may enable us to appreciate some features of his thought which may be particularly pertinent at present and which have hitherto been neglected. I contend that Simmel's two-sided diagnosis of modernity remains illuminating, and that the educational program he projects can be a source of fruitful debate about the future of (post-) modern humanity.

In developing this argument I shall have occasion to challenge two common interpretations of Simmel: the thesis of Simmel's alleged indifferentism and the thesis of Simmel's alleged pessimism. I shall challenge the view, espoused by commentators like Georg Lukacs and David Frisby, that Simmel lacked a center of firm commitments and wholly retreated from social reality (Levine, 1985: 134)--and argue instead that Simmel's writings reveal a consistent commitment to the value of human individuality and personal integrity. I shall also challenge the view frequently espoused by those who find Simmel an articulate critic, rather than indifferent to the human condition in modern culture, but who represent him as an unrelieved pessimist--commentators like Bryan Green, who acknowledges Simmel's 'commitment to the cultivation . . . of unique individuality,' but hold that when he came to considering its conditions, he could find only 'a fateful tragedy, an inevitable overwhelming of subjective cultivation by cultural forms and techniques' (1988: 93). Instead, I shall argue that Simmel both analyzes conditions which favor individuality in modern society and suggests ways in which to cultivate it.

In representing Simmel's conception of modernity<sup>iii</sup> one must take care to consider at least four different lines of his work: his extension of Spencerian differentiation theory, as embodied in his first monograph, On Social Differentiation ([OSD]1890); his writings on culture, reflecting the influence of Moritz Lazarus, writings which include his doctoral work on music and a number of later essays on the philosophy of culture; his highly original explorations on money, assembled in the two editions of The Philosophy of Money (1900 and 1907); and his equally original explorations on urban life which appear in the 1903 essay, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life.'

In reviewing Simmel's writings on modernity one is struck by the lack of regard for issues which loom large in the work of most other classic authors. Simmel paid little or no attention to such familiar themes as political centralization, social stratification, bureaucratization, social solidarity, equality, justice, the rationalization of law, and secularization. On the other hand, these writings exhibit a notable coherence owing to their focus on one major interpretive theme: the scattered texts where Simmel plants his diagnoses

of modernity all pose the question of what effects the conditions of modern life have for the fulfillment of individual personality.

This theme appeared already in the very first sociological essay which Simmel published, the 'Bemerkungen zu sociaethischen Problemen' of 1888, where he argues that the expansion of the sphere in which people associate promotes the development of their individuality--an argument which gets elaborated in chapter 3 of OSD and further developed in chapter 10 of the Soziologie of 1908. The remaining substantive chapters of OSD depict different patterns of evolutionary development from 'more primitive epochs' to the modern era which represent other modes of increased individuation. These include the transition from a form in which jural responsibility is invested in groups to one in which liability is assigned to individual persons (ch. 2); from a condition in which shared beliefs embody the lowest common denominator of mental activity to one which permits individualized intellectual attainment (ch. 4); and from a relatively compulsory pattern of group affiliations based on the accidents of birth and propinquity to one in which persons associate voluntarily on the basis of shared interests, thereby creating more individuated constellations of group affiliation (ch. 5; revised to form ch. 6 of Soziologie).

In The Philosophy of Money, Simmel extends these lines of argument in several ways. First, he supplements his analysis of group structural properties as sources of individuation by considering the ways in which the use of money as a general medium of exchange similarly advances the processes of personal emancipation. Thus, just as the enlargement of spheres of social contact liberates individuals by removing them from the conventional constraints of local communities, so money promotes freedom in the sense of liberation from external constraints: indirectly by enlarging the effective sphere of exchange relations through an expanded market, and directly, by facilitating transactions in which the obligations by which persons are bound to one another can be limited to a very precise and specific exchange. Second, he considers the repercussions within the personality of this withdrawal of external restraints. Negatively, that signifies the 'independence from and exclusion of all extraneous factors, and development exclusively according to the laws of one's own being which we call freedom' (1978: 302). Positively, it signifies the differentiation of a person's impulses, interests, and capacities such that these 'various individual energies develop and run their course exclusively in accord with their own purposes and norms' (1989: 418; 1978: 313, translation modified).

In addition, Simmel considers the way in which money promotes individuation by granting new powers to the individual. Just as the shift from associations based on kinship and local territorial bonds to voluntary interest associations provides new resources for pursuing one's goals and realizing the unhampered development of one's unique personality, so money provides the freedom to carry out one's intentions. Again, it does this both indirectly, by facilitating the formation of innumerable voluntary associations organized around particular objective interests, and directly in a number of ways. Money enhances the freedom to act in that, of all objects, money offers the least resistance to an agent. It is the most possessable of all things, hence completely submissive to the will of an ego. It can be acquired in

countless ways. The amount of it that one can possess can be increased indefinitely, and its uses are without number.

In yet another, more abstract line of argument about the process of individuation, Simmel associates the modern order with an unprecedented degree of emancipation of human subjectivity from the demands of objects and objectivity. By providing an effective means of differentiating between the subjective center and the objective achievements of a person, money figures as the great agent of this process. For example, an individual's performance may be paid for with money while her or his person remains outside the transaction. Or else individual persons can be supported (by monetary contributions from many others) while their specific performances remain free from financial considerations and constraints. Further in this vein Simmel argues that the separation of workers from their means of production (for which a 'money economy paved the way'), while viewed by some as the focal point of social misery, may rather be viewed 'as a salvation' insofar as it provides conditions for the liberation of the worker as a human subject from the objectified technical apparatus of productivity (1978: 337). Summarizing many of these lines of argument, Simmel concludes that money 'frees us both when we give it away and when we take it' and as a consequence 'the continuous processes of liberation occupy an extraordinarily broad section of modern life' (1989: 555; 1978: 403-4).

In view of the foregoing, I find it puzzling to find interpretations of Simmel's theory of modernity which ignore what Simmel regards as enormous emancipatory developments in the modern order, developments which for him signal a great advance for humanity by virtue of encouraging an unprecedented degree of individuation.<sup>iv</sup> (What is more, I believe that Simmel's main lines of argument on this point are valid and significant, and that they are consistent with a good deal else that has been written about modernity by Durkheim and by a number of later sociologists.) Even so, while the emancipation of individuality figures as a major hallmark of modernity for Simmel, an even more basic feature of the modern order is its capacity to differentiate and to promote opposed characteristics. This is particularly true for those structural features of modernity which Simmel singles out for intensive analysis: the use of money as a generalized medium of exchange, and the psychic effects of metropolitan living. As Simmel puts it with regard to the former, money 'cultivates all the opposites of historical-psychological possibilities' (1978: 409). And so, if it is true that money transforms human life by opening up unparalleled kinds of freedom, it is also true that for Simmel a number of negative tendencies accompany that transformation. He addresses certain negative consequences of this new freedom and some new forms of unfreedom.

## II

The negative consequences of freedom include the possibility of a lowered standard of living, especially for emancipated peasants, as well as the economic insecurities attendant on the fluctuations of a free market economy. Above all, Simmel emphasizes the sense of deracination which often accompanies

the emancipation of persons from objects to which they have been bound, but which have given their lives stability and meaning. He describes the emptiness and instability experienced by peasants who have been liberated by cash payments, and the boredom and inner restlessness of the tradesman who has sold his entire business for cash. In sum, 'since under very rapid money transactions possessions are no longer classified according to the category of a specific life-content, that inner bond, amalgamation and devotion in no way develops which, though it restricts the personality, none the less gives support and content to it. This explains why our age, which, on the whole, certainly possesses more freedom than any previous one, is unable to enjoy it properly' (1978: 403).

Simmel goes on to elaborate this theme of the detachment of human subjects from traditional moorings in his later writings on modern culture, especially 'The Conflict in Modern Culture' (1918). In that essay he argues that the perennial struggle between contemporary forms filled with life and old, lifeless forms appears to have given way in the modern era to an opposition of vital energies to the very principle of form itself. This antagonism is self-destructive, however. Life wishes here to obtain something impossible: although subjects may seek to transcend all forms and to express the energy of life in its naked immediacy, life can only proceed by producing and utilizing forms. As a result of this intensification of the perennial conflict between form and life process, 'we gaze into an abyss of unformed life beneath our feet' (1971: 393). The phenomenology of this condition is luxuriantly described in the closing sections of The Philosophy of Money, where Simmel depicts the lability and fecklessness of modern cultural tastes.

In other writings, Simmel alludes to the fragmentation of personal experience under modern conditions. The multiplication of intersecting social circles gives each person an increasingly unique constellation of social connections but also multiplies the competing demands for their attention. The separate and incommensurable spheres of culture make conflicting claims--'we are constantly circulating over a number of different planes, each of which presents the world-totality according to a different formula; but from each our life takes only a fragment along at any given time' (1918: 37)--and this fragmentation gets amplified by the diversification of specialized spheres in modern culture.

Beyond noting the negative effects of the modern economy in the personal disorientation produced by excessive freedom, The Philosophy of Money identifies other difficulties which appear in the form of new kinds of oppression. For example, restricting personal obligations to something that may be fulfilled by a monetary payment can produce a kind of disenfranchisement in instances where the obligated person had acquired some sort of influence or special rights by virtue of that relationship (1978: 395). Moreover, the modern objectification of the process of production brings about new forms of enslavement, both the enslavement of workers to an impersonal production process and the enslavement of consumers to products which come to seem indispensable, yet 'could and even ought to be dispensed with as far as the essence of life is concerned' (1978: 483).

Simmel goes on to analyze other consequences of an advanced money economy which threaten the individual person. He describes ways in which persons are debased by virtue of the translation of personal

qualities and values into monetary terms. He also discusses the consequences of the extension of the 'teleological series'--the addition of numerous techniques in modern life which add so many new means into the cultural repertoire that chains of means-ends relationship get inordinately lengthened. As a result, individuals tend to lose sight of the ultimate ends of their strivings, and become fixated on goals which are nothing but instrumental means.

Above all, Simmel identifies a new order of oppressiveness with the autonomization of objective culture in the modern period. Thanks to the division of labour and the modern money economy, objectified cultural forms get created at a rate which exceeds the capacity of human subjects to absorb them. The unceasing production of new techniques and diverse cultural objects creates the 'typically problematic situation of modern man, his sense of being surrounded by an innumerable number of cultural elements which are neither meaningless to him nor, in the final analysis, meaningful. In their mass they depress him, since he is not capable of assimilating them all, nor can he simply reject them, since after all they do belong potentially within the sphere of his cultural development' (1968b: 44).

Just as money cultivates opposed historical-psychological possibilities, so the modern metropolis provides a place where 'conflicting life-embracing currents find themselves with equal legitimacy' (1971: 339). Simmel's essay on this subject constitutes an inquiry into the specifically modern aspects of contemporary life which bear on the struggle of individuals to maintain their autonomy and individuality in the face of overwhelming supra-individual forces of social organization, technology, and cultural tradition. His analysis focuses on three pairs of opposed tendencies.

First, Simmel discusses the forces which threaten and promote the modern ideal of individual autonomy in the metropolis. The individual's freedom of action is seriously curtailed by the pressures for adhering to precise social arrangements, punctuality and impersonal kinds of transactions which are demanded by the rationalistic ethos of the big city and its money economy. These same factors, however, promote a psychic defense of reserve and aversion behind which individuals gain a new kind of freedom of response. This facade forms the protective covering for 'a type and degree of personal freedom to which there is no analogy in other circumstances' (1971: 332). The freedom in question is that gained by the enlargement of the sphere of social association and the corresponding diminution of those smothering social controls exerted over dwellers in small towns and villages.

Secondly, the essay discusses the forces which threaten and promote the modern ideal of individuality, the freedom to develop a unique self. Cities promote this individuality by supporting an extreme degree of specialization. At the same time, the division of labor threatens individuality, not only by exacting a one-sided kind of performance which permits the personality as a whole to deteriorate, but also, through its relentless productivity, by engulfing the individual in a world of cultural objects. These reduce him to a 'mere cog' in 'the vast overwhelming organization of things and forces which gradually take out of his hands everything connected with progress, spirituality and value' (337). In response to this oppressive situation, however, the conditions of modern urban life make possible a new source of

individuality, that which arises in protest against the mass of depersonalized cultural accomplishment and expresses itself in the form of accentuated idiosyncratic traits and eccentric personalities, and the popularization of culture heroes who preach doctrines of extreme individuality. Were he writing today, Simmel would doubtless make reference to such phenomena as rock stars and individualized T-shirts.

Finally, there is the opposition between those two ideals of individualism themselves--between the ideal of autonomy, which Simmel associates with the 18th-century liberalist struggle against traditional constraints, and the ideal of individuality, which Simmel associates with the 19th-century romantic movement and advocates of specialized vocations. Not only does the modern metropolis stimulate the development of these two ideals (as well as provide obstacles to their realization) but it is the function of the metropolis to provide an arena for the conflict and shifting relations between these two great ideals, a struggle which constitutes much of the 'external as well as the internal history of our time' (339).

### III

If Simmel was content simply to analyze these contradictory tendencies of the modern order in the first years of this century, by 1916 he was ready to diagnose the modern situation as that of a persisting, chronic state of crisis. Summing up its main symptoms, Simmel wrote in 'The Crisis of Culture':

That mere means count as final purposes, thus completely distorting the rational order of inner and practical existence; that objective culture develops in a degree and tempo which leaves farther and farther behind the cultivation of subjects, which alone provides meaning for all perfection of objects; that the individual branches of culture grow apart in divergent directions and mutual alienation, such that the totality of culture hastens toward the fate of the tower of Babel and its deepest value, which exists precisely in the coherence of its parts, seems threatened with its annihilation . . . all this threatens to lead culture to ruin. (1968a: 235)

To limit one's attention to this stark diagnosis of cultural anomie and alienation, however, is to forget the other side of Simmel's invariably 'dialectical' mode of understanding. His late writings also indicate a number of bases for resistance against those negative tendencies. These consist of a renewed appeal to the creative energies of the life process; the articulation of a modern ideal of personal development; and a set of prescriptions for educational practice.

Indeed, in very same essay Simmel went on to observe that 'the fundamental, dynamic unity of life continually offers resistance to [this crisis of culture] , and forces the alienating objectivity to return back to the source of life itself' (1968a: 235). Although in that piece Simmel could only appeal to the energizing effects of the World War as an instance of this reunifying process, in other writings he leaves open the ways in which this return to basic, vital roots might manifest itself.



At this point we should take note of the centrality of the concept of life in Simmel's thought more generally. The prominence of Kantian motifs in Simmel's work has tended to obscure the equally prominent role of vitalistic motifs. Far from being an afterthought inspired by Bergson, the notion of life process played a foundational role throughout Simmel's career. Some of his early writings, including the doctoral essay on music and the paper on 'evolutionary epistemology' of 1896, were clearly inspired by Darwinian theory. Throughout his middle years he was engaged with the figures from the German tradition who focused on vitalistic principles--with Goethe, and Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. With his culminating philosophic work, Lebensanschauung, Simmel explicitly articulated a series of notions about the life process.

Viewed from the perspective of his philosophy of life, the contradictions of modern culture represent no more than an intensification of that conflict between life process and generated forms which represents a constitutive feature of life at the symbolic level. If the cultural forms, with their fragmenting and oppressing demands, seem to be out of control, that imbalance is bound, sooner or later, to evoke a reaction, because the life-related 'positive and meaningful elements of culture always produce counterforces' (1968a: 235). And the energy of the life process is essentially a force that animates individual lives:

Life is a stream whose [individual] drops are its essence. Life does not pass through them; rather, its flowing is nothing other than their existence. . . . The more that life manifests itself at the psychic level, the more we perceive its greatest concentration, its highest vitality, as it were--and precisely here [we find] the highest individuality of the single being. (1968a: 205-6)

Moreover, just as human reality exists in the form of individualized beings, so moral obligation, in Simmel's mature view, must be understood as flowing from the character of the individual. The categorical imperative cannot take the form of a universal maxim, because universals are external to the ethical person and not an expression of the individual's own authentic being. Moral obligation does not express some external content, but flows from the idealization of the life process. Reality and Value remain two irreducibly different modes of categorizing all the contents of life, but the distinction does not correspond to that between individuality and generality; rather, the distinction falls within each individual existence. The ethical moment relates not to some external purpose, but 'is determined by the developing life out of its own roots' (1919: 239; 1968a: 226). A further implication of this 'vitalization and individualization of ethics' is that one's moral imperative does not remain fixed for all time, but changes in accord with the integration of emerging ethical decisions; for just as each increment of warranted knowledge subtly changes the entire configuration of our cognitive sensibility, so each new ethical decision affects our entire moral personality. In consequence, 'the responsibility for our entire history lies in the emerging duty of every single action' (Schon in dem Gesolltwerden jedes einzelnen Tuns liegt die Verantwortung für unsere ganze Geschichte [1919: 243; 1968a: 228]).

To hold this position is not to espouse a doctrine of egoism or even of individual self-perfection, Simmel advises us. That one's ideal conception should flower forth from the roots of one's individual life does not entail that its contents must necessarily turn back to that source. Those contents could just as readily be turned into social, altruistic, spiritual, or artistic directions. What matters is simply that the ideal stems from the inner resources of the individual person.

With this formulation of a doctrine of an individualized ethics, which he terms *das individuelle Gesetz* (the Individual Law), Simmel consummated his life-long quest to represent the liberation of individual personality in the modern order. He has supplemented his delineation of ways in which the modern individual has become liberated from external social constraints with an argument for liberation of individuals from external ideal norms. He has proclaimed a novel doctrine which makes the ethically free individual as well as the empirically liberated individual the foundation for interpreting the modern human order.<sup>v</sup>

#### IV

The cultivation of individual autonomy and integrity as an antidote to the crisis of modern culture was something Simmel not only analyzed in his abstract speculations. He also devoted considerable thought to the ways in which such individuality could be promoted. The main vehicle of this concern was his analysis of appropriate educational practices.<sup>vi</sup> In fact, in the very year in which Simmel published his 'Crisis of Culture' essay, he offered a course of lectures on educational theory at the University of Strassburg. Since wartime conditions had converted the main university building into a hospital, he delivered these lectures in the Botanical Institute. They were published posthumously, in 1922, as *Schulpädagogik*. No less than Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, Dewey, and Mead, Simmel complemented his social theory with systematic attention to the problems of pedagogy.

*Schulpädagogik* sets forth a rich array of pedagogical principles and practices, but it is informed by the core intention of helping students develop as complete, individual personalities. Simmel's sense of the critical tension between objective and subjective culture pervades its argument. He looks continually for ways to promote the process of *Bildung*, the cultivation of subjective powers through the utilization of objective contents.

The old-fashioned view of the student as a vessel into which information is to be dumped has given way to the modern ideal of engaging the student actively in a learning process. But the contemporary school system, Simmel notes, has not departed very much from that old-time 'objectivism.' Rather than indulge in fruitless criticism, Simmel says he will ask simply: Taking schools as they are, how can one become the best possible teacher? (1922: 12)

The best approach is to follow a 'genetic method,' bringing instructional materials to the students in accord with the stages of their organic development. Since objective knowledge figures here as a means to the end of developing the student as a complete human being, the point is not to amass a certain amount of

information, least of all by rote memorization. ‘Nothing should be learned which does not in some way contribute to the life of the student--be it through a strengthening of the energy for a certain function which this learning carries, or through the farther-reaching significance which this content wins for the depth, clarity, breadth, and moral constitution of the student’ (22).

Acknowledging the individuality of the student means that the unconditional authority of the teacher must be renounced, since mastery of a certain subject matter now forms only part of the teacher’s relevant qualifications. Attending to the differing interests and capacities of students means that patience must become one of the most essential qualifications of a teacher, as well as the ability to take stock of the student’s total personality through nonjudgmental observation. Successful teaching in this mode involves appealing to the experience of the students, engaging their interest in the subject by showing its connections to their own lives, and evoking a certain mood in the class that is appropriate to the subject matter being discussed.

Moral education, like every other instructional domain, should be subordinated to the broader ideal of cultivating one’s full humanity, an ideal that encompasses ‘power, spiritual meaning, pride, and joie de vivre’ (114). Moral development should be enhanced neither through didactic exposition of ethical principles nor through mechanistic reinforcement of moral conduct. Instead, Simmel calls for a third approach, one which encourages students to engage in moral practices in ways that lead them to reflect on the moral principles they embody. He urges teachers to help students appreciate moral practices, not on the basis of external pressures like belief in authority but out of inner conviction. Indeed, his pedagogical approach emphasizes the importance of appealing to the students’ inner motivations and eliciting responses that proceed from their own free will. Thus, while advising teachers frankly to acknowledge differences in students’ capacities, he recommends that they reward students on the basis of their effort, industry, and attentiveness, not on the basis of their natural gifts.

Time and again, Simmel presents ideas for how to make the materials of objective culture pertinent to the individual student’s development as a complete human being. Decrying the current atomization of disciplines, he advocates a curriculum which offers the student a coherent sequence of learning experiences--and makes the student aware of that coherence. He defines the teacher’s goal as that of making himself superfluous as students come to learn for themselves and to internalize a schema of intellectual connections flexible enough to facilitate the acquisition of new knowledge. The task of the good teacher, in short, is to provide a continuous setting for overcoming the crisis of modern culture.

Although Simmel’s lectures on pedagogy were aimed at pre-collegiate teachers, we should also take note of the ways in which he adhered to their principles in his role as a university teacher. Indeed, his prowess as a lecturer was legendary; no other eminent figure in sociology earned so dazzling a reputation as a classroom teacher. What counts here, of course, is not his reputation but the practices he followed in using his teaching to stimulate the independent thinking of his hearers. Both from his many published lectures and from the reports of former students we can discern the working of the principles Simmel

articulated in *Schulpädagogik*--the way he prodded listeners to think by laying down a certain line of thought, then abruptly challenging the assumptions he had just elaborated; his frequent use of analogies to connect insights on particular topics to diverse domains of culture; his appeal to the life experiences of listeners as a basis for deriving or exemplifying quite abstract notions. What he said of his great treatise on money--that its point was to demonstrate 'the possibility . . . of finding in each of life's details the totality of its meaning'(1978: 55)--was true of a good many of his expository efforts. And that work contains a number of passages with profound curricular and pedagogical implications.<sup>vii</sup> That Simmel's ability as a teacher weighed on his mind appears from a reminiscence conveyed by one of his many distinguished former students, Martin Buber.<sup>viii</sup> Before leaving for Strassburg, Buber recalled, Simmel asked him with some trepidation just what, finally, he had given to his students in Berlin. Buber's reply--'you taught them how to think'--seemed to leave him satisfied (Gassen and Landmann, 1958: 223).

In this light Simmel's famous testamentary statement, that he was leaving behind no disciples, but a legacy like cash--'distributed to many heirs, each transforming his part into use according to his nature' (1919: 121)--takes on a special meaning. The author of that statement had of course produced an acute analysis of the significance of money for personal growth: that it maximizes the freedom of individuals to pursue their own interests and develop their personalities in accord with their innermost dispositions and aspirations. Consistent to the end, Simmel evinced a radical respect for the individuality and developmental capacities of every person.

## V

Recalling now the interpretive schema presented at the beginning of this paper, we may summarize its argument as follows. For Simmel, the most salient effects of the factors which produced the modern order--the enlargement of societies and the concentration of populations in large cities, the extended division of labor and the widespread use of money as a generalized medium of exchange--produced a number of transformations which benefit humanity. These take the form of an unprecedented liberation of individuals from social constraints, and the opening up of unprecedented opportunities for their individual development. At the same time, these same forces have introduced new kinds of human problems, represented by phenomena which others have described as anomie and alienation, changes which seriously threaten the moral integration and cultural development of individuals. The threats to subjective culture have become so acute that Simmel came to describe the modern order as marked by a chronic state of crisis.

As an antidote to this crisis, Simmel appealed, by precept and example, to a kind of educational process that focused on the development of the potentialities of the individual person. His program is familiar to us today under the name of 'liberal education.' In the key elements of the crisis which Simmel diagnosed, we may recognize some central motifs of the philosophy of liberal education in our time: to counter the fetishism of techniques and methods with a return of attention to ultimate human purposes; to

counter the atomization of the disciplines with a sense of the connectedness of the different domains of culture; and to counter the alienation of objectified culture by connecting knowledge with the cultivation of human powers, and with its roots in the ongoing flow of the life process.

In the repertoire of models and metaphors about modernity we inherit from the classic tradition, Simmel's distinctive contribution remains timely. We continue to experience the chronic crisis he depicted so acutely; we continue to need the antidotes he outlined so thoughtfully. And, as we pursue our quest to make sense of the modern order by considering the other great theories in that repertoire, we shall find ourselves returning again to Simmel, securing stimulation from those evocative glosses on what he calls 'the deepest mystery of our world view, Individuality--this unanalyzable unity, which is not to be derived from anything else, not subsumable under any higher concept, set within a world otherwise infinitely analyzable, calculable and governed by general laws--this individuality [which] stands for us [moderns] as the actual focal point of love' (1971: 244, 242).

## **N**otes

- i. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference, 'Culture, Eros and Modern Society: Contemporary Potentialities in Georg Simmel's Sociological and Cultural Theories,' Bergen, Norway, May 21-22, 1990.
- ii. See Green, 1988: chapter 7.
- iii. The following few pages draw on Levine 1981.
- iv. This misreading is promoted by the way certain passages are rendered in the English translation. Thus, Frisby misleadingly translates what Simmel intends as 'de-rooting of the personality' (*Entwurzelung der Persönlichkeit*), the destabilization that ensues under some conditions of emancipation, as 'extirpation of the personality,' and mistranslates the passage where Simmel argues that diffuse personal relations are dissolved in the segmental transactions of monetarized relationships as: 'such a personality is almost completely destroyed under the conditions of a money economy' (1978, 400, 296; 1989, 1, 393).
- v. With his doctrine of the Individual Law, which began to take shape in the early years of this century, Simmel thus emerged as the first systematic philosopher to propound some of the central tenets of what became known as existentialism. As a system of normative ethics, of course, it remains vulnerable to the various objections which have been levied against existentialist ethics generally.
- vi. Rüdiger Kramme has independently provided convergent documentation of Simmel's stance as an actively engaged philosopher, with an analysis of Simmel's efforts to promote the humanistic development of modern individuals through his work for the

journal *Logos*, in 'Fragments of Life/The Enclosure of Being--Simmel's Philosophy of Culture, 1908-1918,' a paper presented at the conference, 'Culture, Eros and Modern Society: Contemporary Potentialities in Georg Simmel's Sociological and Cultural Theories,' Bergen, Norway, May 21-22, 1990.

vii. 'No one speaking his mother tongue senses the objective law-like regularities that he has to consult, like something outside of his own subjectivity, in order to borrow from them resources for expressing his feelings--resources that obey independent norms. . . . In the same way, people who know only one uniform style which permeates their whole life will perceive this style as being identical with its contents. Since everything they create or contemplate is naturally expressed in this style, there are no psychological grounds for distinguishing it from the material of the formative and contemplative process or for contrasting the style as a form independent of the self.'

'Intelligence definitely requires fusing with general life-energy. However, the more it coalesces with specific forms of that energy, for example, religious, political, sensual, etc., then more it is in danger of being unable to develop its own independent direction. Thus, artistic production at the levels of particular refinement and spirituality depends on a higher degree of intellectual training; but it will be able to profit by that development, or even to bear it, only if the straining is not too specialized but rather unfolds its range and its depth only in more general fields of knowledge.' (1978, 462, 314)

viii. The roster of Simmel's former students includes such luminaries as Ernst Bloch, Ortega y Gasset, Georg Lukacs, Robert Park, Max Scheler, Herman Schmalenbach, and Albert Schweitzer.

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Abstract of Donald N. Levine, "Simmel as Educator: On Individuality and Modern Culture" (Theory, Culture, and Society, vol. 8 (1991), 99-117).

Like many other social theorists from Adam Ferguson to George Herbert Mead, Georg Simmel can productively be viewed as offering a conception of modernity that includes both critical elements and proposals for educational reform. Simmel's alleged indifferentism and pessimism dissolve when one considers four different lines of his work: the extension of Spencerian differentiation theory, his writings on culture, and his highly original speculations on money, and on urban life. These diverse texts exhibit a single project: to understand what effects the conditions of modern life have upon the fulfillment of individual personality.

While, for Simmel, the modern order provides a welcome and unprecedented degree of emancipation of human subjectivity from objects and objectivity (through, for example, the agency of money), this liberation from social constraints is not without negative aspects. The translation of personal qualities into monetary terms can be debasing; the autonomization of objective culture can be oppressive. Simmel provides resources for addressing the cultural crises produced by these alienating tendencies in modern life, including a new kind of humanistic ethic spelled out in "*Das individuelle Gesetz*," and a set of pedagogical ideas articulated in his little-known *Schulpädagogik*. Simmel, himself a devoted teacher, recognized the potential of education as an antidote to the ills of modern life and a means to achieve unprecedented individual fulfillment. Simmel's proposals include what were to become familiar twentieth-century ideals of liberal education, with the fundamental goal that education must be transformed to facilitate the promotion of individuality and the cultivation of a full humanity. His diagnoses of modern culture, like those of other classic social theorists, have much to offer students of contemporary culture.