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Simmel's Shifting Formulations Regarding the Antinomies of Modern Culture\*239-63

In a series of publications that span the last dozen years of his life, Simmel produced a stream of reflections on the nature of modern culture and its relation to authentic individuality. Some germinal ideas of this work were broached in 1900, in a lengthy article in the *Neue Deutsche Rundschau*, "Persönliche und sachliche Kultur" (GSG 5: 560-582), incorporated in chapter 6 of the *Philosophie des Geldes* in a section on "The Concept of Culture" (GSG 6: 617-654). In the years following those publications Simmel produced brief analyses of particular forms of culture—including art, fashion, philosophy, and religion—and published the first version of his essay on feminine culture. Then, following the second edition of the opus on money in 1907, he published trenchant reflections on the nature of culture and its problematic relation to personal fulfillment in the modern world at the rate of nearly one per year, as follows:

1908: "Vom Wesen der Kultur" (GSG 8: 363-373);

1909: "Die Zukunft unserer Kultur. Stimmen über Kulturtendenzen und Kulturpolitik" (GSG 17: 79-83);

1911: "Weibliche Kultur" (GSG 12: 251-289);

1911: "Der Begriff und die Tragödie der Kultur" (GSG 12: 194-223);

1916: "Die Krisis der Kultur" (GSG 13: 190-201);

1916: "Wandel der Kulturformen" (ibid.: 217-223);

1917: "Die Krisis der Kultur," revised (GSG 16: 37-53);

1918: "Der Konflikt der modernen Kultur. Ein Vortrag" (GSG 16: 181-207).

In addition, Simmel discussed his general theory of culture in academic lectures that exhibit a parallel chronology:

1898/99 (Winter): "Philosophie des 19. Jahrhunderts, mit Berücksichtigung der Kulturprobleme der Gegenwart"

1906/7 (Winter): "Philosophie der Kultur"

1907/8 (Winter): "Philosophie der Kultur, besonders der sozialen und der ästhetischen"

1909/10 (Winter): "Probleme der modernen Kultur (Individuum und Gesellschaft, die Frauenfrage, die Stilentwicklung in der Kunst)"

1911 (Summer): "Probleme der modernen Kultur (der Streit der Kunstprinzipien, das religiöse Problem, objektive und subjektive Kultur)"

1913 (Summer): "Ethik und Probleme der modernen Kultur"

1914 (Summer): "Kulturprobleme der Neuzeit"

This modest but pregnant body of work has been neglected in the secondary literature. Because the early appropriations of Simmel's work into modern scholarship drew primarily on his analyses of forms of social interaction (Levine et al, 1976), his less well developed but highly suggestive work on forms of culture was almost wholly ignored in the half-century after his death. One apparent exception, Rudolph Weingartner's pioneering *Experience and Culture* (1960), focuses on Simmel's philosophical thought but devotes only a few pages to his theory of culture. Guy Oakes (1980) advanced that line of exegesis in a pithy introductory essay which also broached the issue of Simmel's view of modern culture. Over the past few decades, owing partly to the belated translation of *Philosophie des Geldes* into English (1978) and Italian (1984), some aspects of Simmel's theory of modern culture became prominent, among neo-Marxist theories of alienation—which, Birgitta Nedelmann (1993) has shown, yields a one-sided

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appropriation of Simmel's thought on modern culture—and among those who seek to valorize "postmodernism" by drawing on Simmel as a postmodernist *avant le mot* a century before.

Only in 2003, with Willfried Gessner's *Der Schatz im Acker: Georg Simmel's Philosophie der Kultur*, does there appear a systematic effort to bring together Simmel's diverse writings on culture—together with a good deal of his work that does not thematize culture. A circumspect review of the Simmelian corpus within a perspective based on the author's construction of what Simmel understands by culture, this work offers an instructive guide through that literature.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Gessner's book is misleading in two respects.

For one thing, it quite misses the scope and significance of the contradictory formulations that Simmel presents regarding modern culture. To be sure, Gessner does identify the crucial texts in question. Once one peruses the sequence of Simmelian publications listed above, one faces a stunning paradox. During the years when Simmel produced the magisterial synthesis of his fundamental ideas in the "four metaphysical chapters" of his *Lebensanschauung* (GSG 16: 209-425; *The View of Life*<sup>2</sup>), he was quietly transforming his basic diagnosis of the critical condition of modern culture. From viewing modern culture as a tragically oppressive superindividual formation he came to see it as vulnerable and weak. From viewing individuals mainly as consumers of culture he shifted to viewing individuals more as vital producers of culture. In both perspectives, human needs are frustrated; but in the latter, the meaning of the frustration has reversed. Only by grasping this dramatic shift can one fully appropriate Simmel's general interpretive stance on modernity and therewith adequately inform our own self-understanding as hapless participants in the culture of modernity. *Der Schatz im Acker* documents that shift meticulously but fails, I shall argue, to do justice to its dramatic significance.

Beyond that, Gessner's book errs by compressing the diverse meanings of culture in Simmel's oeuvre into a single notion, that of the Superindividual (*das Überindividuelle*). This is doubly problematic. For one thing, in stressing the Superindividual he fails to do justice to Simmel's emphasis on the agency of individuals as the medium for the creation and consumption of cultural objects. Moreover, the pursuit of a single concept of culture in Simmel's oeuvre ignores the multiplicity of meanings that Simmel attaches to culture and thereby bypasses a central feature of Simmel's approach to methodological issues.

#### *Personal Agency and Culture*

Although Simmel analyzed diverse cultural phenomena in the 1890s—most notably in writings on music and history—only in 1900 did he formulate a general concept of culture. And from the outset his concept designated two contrasting forms, both of which derive from activities of individuals. The language used when he introduces this concept is so telling that it is worth quoting at length.

When the intelligent will works things up to the level at which we refer to them as cultivated ("*kultivirt*") the will performs its *cultural* work not on the things themselves but on us. The goods of material culture—furniture and cultivated plants, works of art and machines, tools and books—reflect our own wishes and feelings: they represent the actualization of ideas for development of natural materials into forms for which they have the potential, but which are never realized by their own powers alone. The same thing holds with regard to the kind of cultural items that form the relations of humans to one another other and to themselves: language, morals, religion, and law. To the extent that these values are interpreted as cultural, we distinguish them from the merely natural stages of growth determined by their internal energies, which are only *material* for the process of cultivation, such as wood, metal, plants, and electricity. In cultivating things—that is, when we increase their value beyond what their natural mechanism affords—we cultivate ourselves. This comprises the same value-increasing process that springs

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<sup>1</sup> This is one of the first publications to rely extensively on the invaluable resources of the *Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe* (GSG), so the guide is doubly useful.

<sup>2</sup> English translation by Andrews and Levine, forthcoming, University of Chicago Press. See also Silver, Lee, and Moore 2007.

from us and returns to us; it involves something beyond nature that has an impact on the nature external to us or on the nature inside of us.<sup>3</sup>

It is important, then, to keep in mind that Simmel thought of *Kultur* primarily in the sense of cultivation (*Kultivierung* or *Bildung*). As the etymology suggests, this is closer to the Latin/French notion of culture. It differs profoundly from the anthropological notion of culture in the sense of customs and folkways, a meaning imprinted on American anthropology through the influence of Franz Boas and his students. Although Simmel was fully aware of that referent, he was more likely to describe it with the term *Sitte*, or customs. His engagement with culture related to his view of humans as creatures disposed to fashion natural objects in certain ways. Thus, to take an example he would use in “The Nature of Culture” (1908; GSG 8: 363-73), a wild pear tree has an inherent tendency to bear fruit. Since the wild fruit tastes bitter to us, humans cultivate pear trees so they will bear sweeter fruit. As they do so, they cultivate themselves as well. Moreover, humans are creatures with an innate propensity to develop *themselves* in special ways: after transforming natural into cultural objects, they then incorporate those objects back into the development of an unfolding personality.<sup>4</sup> The universe of external objects in question he glossed as “objective culture” or as “cultural forms.” The elements of objective culture—works of art, ethics, science, literature, religion, and the like—reflexively return to their creators by providing *materials* for the development of the soul. They serve as stations, Simmel writes, through which human subjects must pass in order to acquire the specific personal value known as culture. In one of his summary formulations, culture is a process that leads the subject back to itself at a higher level, “the path from the closed unity [the undeveloped psyche] through the developed diversity [appropriation of diverse forms of objectified culture, D.L.] to the developed unity [integration of the objectified forms with the subject’s psyche, D.L.]” (GSG 12: 251). The incorporation of cultural objects comprises an important part of the telic drive by which present actions in humans foreshadow their future ends.

#### *Simmel’s Supple Treatment of Concepts*

Unlike Emile Durkheim, Vilfredo Pareto, and Max Weber who stressed—albeit for different reasons—an injunction to fashion concepts that are clear, precise, and univocal, Georg Simmel did not set store by methodological and terminological purity (Levine 1985, 1988). On the lectern as in publications, Simmel’s teaching pointedly manifested such ambiguous tropes as analogical thinking, evocative examples, disjunctive syntheses, patent paradoxes, undocumented insights, intuitive procedures and “a certain way of seeing” (“*einer besonderen Einstellung des Blickes*”; GSG 11: 29). Like a portrait bordered by a frame, his methodology was subject-focused, eschewing both the logistic effort to formulate precise principles from which larger theories could be deduced as well as the holistic or dialectic effort to subsume everything under one grand synthetic umbrella (Levine [1957] 1981).

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<sup>3</sup> Wenn der intelligente Wille die Dinge zu der Höhe heraufarbeitet, in der wir sie als kultivirt bezeichnen, so leistet er seine Kulturarbeit doch nicht an ihnen, sondern an uns. Die materiellen Kulturgüter: Möbel und Kulturpflanzen, Kunstwerke und Maschinen, Geräte und Bücher, in denen natürliche Stoffe zu ihnen zwar möglichen, durch ihre eignen Kräfte aber nie verwirklichten Formen entwickelt werden, sind unser eignes, durch Ideen entfaltetes Wollen und Fühlen, das die Entwicklungsmöglichkeiten der Dinge, soweit sie auf seinem Wege liegen, in sich einbezieht; und das verhält sich nicht anders als mit der Kultur, die das Verhältniß des Menschen zu anderen und zu sich selbst formt: Sprache, Sitte, Religion, Recht. Insofern diese Werthe als kulturell angesehen werden, unterscheiden wir sie von den bloß natürlichen Ausbildungsstufen der in ihnen lebendigen Energieen, die aber für den Kultivierungsprozeß ebenso nur Material sind, wie Holz und Metall, Pflanzen und Elektrizität. Indem wir die Dinge kultiviren, d.h. ihr Werthmaab über das durch ihren natürlichen Mechanismus uns geleistete hinaus steigern, kultiviren wir uns selbst: es ist der gleiche, von uns ausgehende und in uns zurückkehrende Wertherhöhungsprozeß, der die Natur außer uns oder die Natur in uns ergreift (GSG 5: 560).

<sup>4</sup> Although Simmel did not explicitly mention it, the concept of a vital formative drive, *Bildungstrieb*, articulated by J. F. Blumenbach and further developed by Lötze, may well be at the root of this formulation [Levine 2007: 251-2].)

This essential ambiguity appears expressly when Simmel articulated the constitutive principle of all his thought: the distinction between form and content (Levine 1959, 1971). His articulation of this principle is clear—"There is perhaps no necessity of thought which is so hard to cast off as the analysis of things into content and form, even though this analysis has neither logical force nor the force of sensibly given data" (GSG 14: 19)<sup>5</sup>—yet he went on to stress that there is no univocal determinate way to execute such analyses. To be sure, one can say that Simmel generally uses 'contents' to designate those aspects of existence that have determinate properties but in themselves contain neither structure nor the possibility of being apprehended in their immediacy, and 'forms' to designate the synthesizing principles which select elements from the raw stuff of experience and shape them into determinate unities. Even so, Simmel made it entirely clear that something can be form in one context and content in another. Thus, when one considers religion as a form, sociality can be one of its contents; whereas when one considers sociality as a form, religion can be one of its contents. Minding this point spares one from having to decide if something is "really" form or content. It also prepares us to be open to the wide variety of meanings that Simmel attaches to the notion of culture.

Thus, after defining culture as a process by which individuals form themselves through the appropriation of externalized objects, he moves quickly to interpret those objects as having a life of their own, as it were—corresponding to what Max Weber referred to as *Eigengesetzlichkeit*, the process by which certain human constructions come to follow their own inner laws of development. To the notion of culture as "personal" or subjective, Simmel immediately counterposed the notion of "objective" culture.<sup>6</sup> Once music has been created for the direct expression of special kinds of human feelings on certain situations—love, warfare, grief, authority, and the like—it begins to follow a different dynamic. As "*l'art pour l'art*"—the phrase Simmel liked to use for this—suggests, it gets pursued for its own sake and follows its own endogenous norms and developmental directions. From the get-go, Simmel's "culture" is two-headed, carrying opposed meanings that derive from the same root, confronting one another as opposites.

This disjunctive conception of culture, interestingly, shaped Simmel's most original contribution to feminist theory—his paper on feminine culture. Considering the women's movement in relation to this conception, Simmel sketched three distinct modes in which the emancipation of women might affect the future development of culture: either by enabling women to share in the same opportunities for cultural development which had previously been restricted to men; or by striking out into domains in which peculiarly feminine kinds of work could be manifest in distinctive forms of objective culture; or by renouncing the compulsion to engage objective culture at all and to find their fulfillment purely in the realm of subjective experience and pure being.

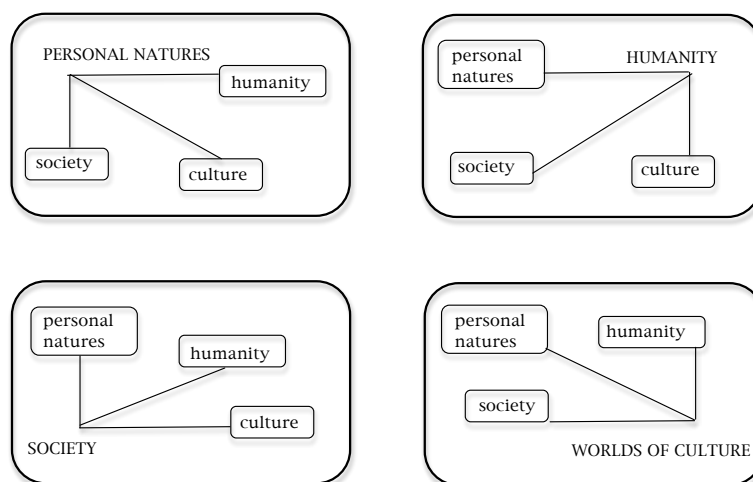
Although these two meanings, culture as cultivation and as a collection of constructs, dominate Simmel's discourse on the topic, additional meanings surface when he uses the concept of culture analytically. At times, he construes culture as a valued object in competition with other valued objects, notably, society and individual personality. It is in this sense that his lectures of 1913 mention an antagonism between the values of culture and of personal ethics. There he speaks of culture in the sense of mind objectified in institutionalized forms that demand recognition and subordination from individuals. On the other hand, this value contrasts with that of subjects who respond to promptings of their own conscience. This difference can produce a situation in which personal ethics and culture oppose one another, in which "both demand the unconditional devotion of the entire person, and with full objectivity: culture demands unlimited devotion with the objectivity of a work of art; ethics demands with the objectivity which inheres in the absolute concept of a 'Good Will' " (Gassen 1913, 311). This opposition goes so far as to pit against one another figures who are, as it were, fanatics for culture at the expense of personality, like Baudelaire and Wilde, and those who are fanatics for personal values at the expense of

<sup>5</sup> To a point, his distinction follows Kant's notion of a priori categories of cognition. In two crucial respects, however, Simmel's view of forms diverges from Kant. Simmel holds that forms are constitutive not in only the cognitive realm, but in any and all dimensions of human experience. And they are not fixed and immutable, but emerge over time, can develop or disappear even.

<sup>6</sup> The German term is *sachlich*, according to the thing itself; it is sometimes grievously translated as material and taken to connote a reference to materialism

culture, like Fichte and Tolstoy. Regarding this issue, Simmel's final word was that all individuals has the obligation to find their own directions in life and to evolve ideals that constitute an authentic expression of their respective autobiographies. This is a purely formal consideration, carrying no substantive bias. That is, persons could choose their ultimate ideals as directed toward the fulfillment of personality, the betterment of society, or the enrichment of culture.

Yet again, there are times when Simmel represents the individual, society, and culture, not as competing values but as alternate perspectives on the world. He adumbrates this approach in a provocative passage in the *Soziologie* (1908 GSG 11), which I once extracted as a stand-alone selection under the heading "The Categories of Human Experience." In that passage, Simmel contemplates the point that all contents of life can be subsumed under *four* grand categories: the individual, society, objective culture, and "humanity." In a subsequent discussion of the architectonics of four classic syntheses—those of Dewey/Mead, Parsons, Marx and Simmel—I characterized Simmel's synthesis as marked by "reciprocal priority among a plurality of worlds," as represented by the following figure (Levine 1995, 304):



### *Modern culture and the modern quest for individuality*

No sooner did Simmel present the germs of this notion of culture, however, than he began to consider the problematic relation between culture and modernity. In the modern era, he observed already in 1900, the experience of cultivation through cultural forms is being disrupted. The division of labor and a highly monetized economy enable cultural objects to be produced in a manner in which human subjectivity is subordinated to objectified production processes and at a rate which exceeds the capacity of human subjects to absorb them. In 1900 and even in the 1908 article on culture Simmel depicted this condition only as posing a certain difficulty, as creating certain "dissonances" in modern life. By 1911, however, he had come to designate it as a "tragic" condition. The tragedy of culture proceeds from the fact that although humans must produce cultural objects in order to fulfill their inherent drive toward becoming cultivated, 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 (GSG 12: 219f.). This situation is tragic because the annihilating forces aimed against the human subject stem from the subject's own deepest layers of creative being.

In an article in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* published in 1916, Simmel analyzed further the dilemma of the self's drive for wholeness in the face of unchecked developments in objective culture. This piece

identified three such dangers: the subordination of personal ends to objectively elaborated technologies, the fragmentation of life due to the increasing separation of objectified spheres of life, and the erosion of personal cultivation due to the proliferation of countless cultural objects. At this point, Simmel diagnosed the condition of modern culture as a veritable crisis: “the destiny of a highly developed culture is that it is a constant delayed crisis. It [manifests] a tendency to cause life, which it is intended to serve, to disintegrate into futility and paradox . . . . For each of us it is, consciously or not, the crisis of our own soul” (GSG 13: 200f.).

In 1917, however, the crisis of culture paper was revised (ref. GSG). Its changes reflected points made in an intervening article from late 1916, “Der Wandel der Kulturformen,” where Simmel posits that “Life in its creativity continually produces something that no longer embodies Life...something that sets itself over against life with its own distinct demands” (GSG 16, 41). The changes at stake may seem minor but as Gessner (2003) perspicaciously points out, they embody a wholly new diagnosis of modern culture. This diagnosis emerged full-blown in 1918 in one of Simmel’s most powerful essays ever, “The Conflict of Modern Culture.” There Simmel depicts the central dilemma of modern culture, not as an oppression of the subjective self through the multiplied forms of objective culture, but as an assault on the very possibility of objective forms through unleashing the subject’s raw expression of vital energies. The whole history of culture, Simmel writes in this essay, has taken shape as a continuous oscillation between periods when cultural forms are suited to the vital energies of the period, and then times of cultural change when those energies find the old forms inadequate and therefore create new forms. What distinguishes the cultural condition of the modern era is that this periodic rebellion, under the inspiration of an over-arching commitment to Life as such, has come to attack the legitimacy of respecting *any* cultural form. How did this drastic change in orientation come about so rapidly, and what can we say about the status of the two positions in Simmel’s thought?

### *The Context of the Change*

Two shifts in Simmel’s outlook took place in 1914, his increasing preoccupation with Bergson’s philosophy of life and the outbreak of World War I. The former, expressed in a 1914 paper entitled “Henri Bergson” (GSG 13: 53-69) provided an elaboration of the idea of the life process he had always found congenial, in his earlier engagement with Darwinian theories and a deep Goethean commitment to the life process (Levine 2007). The outbreak of war jolted Simmel into a sense that the stifling oppressiveness of cultural objects could be sidestepped by an intense engagement with raw experience. In “Deutschlands innere Wandlung,” he suggested that the war situation had overcome the materialistic ethos of the pre-war period and ushered in a period in which individuals became organically fused with the larger German society. Above all, he celebrated the opportunity the war afforded for individuals to experience an “absolute” existential situation (GSG 15: 279), and therewith to gain access to a higher spiritual reality and a deeper manifestation of the possibilities of human life.

These ideas emerged in Simmel’s thinking about culture in two papers published in February of 1916. In the “Crisis” paper, he observed that the War had helped mediate the crisis in two ways. For one thing, it enabled people to bypass objective culture to some extent: “For the soldier, the whole system of culture pales into insignificance, not only because he is, in fact, compelled to do without it, but because in wartime the meaning and demands of life are focused on activity of whose value one is conscious without the mediation of external things” (GSG 13: 193). In addition, the war provided one of those historical moments when the fundamental dynamic unity of life reasserts itself against the cultural forms that stifle and oppress it. In response to the pathologies of modern culture, life, “with its unifying, simplifying, and concentrated force” (ibid.: 201) has risen in revolt against “the disintegration and perversion of cultural life [which] has reached an extreme. . . . Countless forms which had begun to harden and become immune to creative dynamism have been drawn back into the stream of life” (ibid.: 198). To this point about the ways in which the wartime experience brought people back to the existential fundamentals, Simmel added an observation that would reconfigure his final diagnosis of modernity. This was his emphasis on the very concept of *life* which, since Nietzsche, had come to permeate a multitude of spheres, including art, philosophy, and religion.

Six months later, in the *Berliner Tageblatt*, Simmel altered his analytic perspective on the question by drawing a Marxian element into the equation. "Wandel der Kulturformen" incorporated Marx's dialectical analysis of economic development, as an oscillation between periods when forms of production are appropriate to economic forces and periods when economic forces cannot be contained within those forms and therefore break through them. Simmel appropriated this dialectical model and extended it to cover the production of all kinds of cultural forms. For Simmel, there is an inexorable historic conflict between life, which is expanding and streaming further with ever-growing energy, and life's historically situated forms of expression, which persist in their rigid shapes. In "The Conflict of Modern Culture", Simmel injected into this model the primacy of the life principle as he had found it in the writings of Bergson and the existential immediacies of the wartime experience.

#### *The Diagnostic Value of the Double Perspective*

Whatever the biographical factors involved, these shifting formulations prompt us to come to terms with the two apparently contradictory diagnoses of modern culture that Simmel offered within the space of a few years. The easiest way to do so is to deny the contradiction. One could say that in the tragedy-of-culture perspective, Simmel is simply considering the subject as a consumer of culture, and in the conflict-of-culture perspective, he is thinking of the subject as a producer. That is indeed true. One can also note that both perspectives represent the psychology of the subject in somewhat similar fashion, as intensely ambivalent toward culture. In the tragedy-of-culture perspective, the consumer craves culture as a means of finding psychic fulfillment, and find himself antagonistic toward culture because of the fact that in their strongly objectified form and in their magnitude, they frustrate the subject's drive to incorporate them as means of spiritual fulfillment. And in the conflict-of-culture perspective, the vital subject finds forms too constraining and wishes to do without them altogether, and yet craves forms because without them it is impossible to express oneself creatively: the subject can neither live with cultural forms nor without them.

Nevertheless, to downplay the contradiction between Simmel's two diagnoses of modern culture may be to lose sight of the most valuable illumination Simmel's theory has to provide. As I have argued elsewhere (Levine, 1991; Levine, 1995), Simmel considers the most fundamental feature of the modern order to be its tendency to differentiate and to promote opposed characteristics. Thus, regarding the development of individuality, Simmel see the modern social and cultural order as unleashing forces that both enlarge and threaten the possibilities of genuine individuality. And so with the forms of culture. The hypertrophy of cultural forms represents the side of modernity that appears in ever-growing objectification: the undeniable and seemingly illimitable expansion of commodities, symbolic constructs, information systems, legal norms, and the like. And the triumph of life over culture forms represents the side of modernity that expresses itself in ever-increasing directness of subjective expression: the erosion of forms of politeness, the penchant for short cuts in communication, the blurring of genres, the liberation of sexuality, and the like. Holding both of these orders of developments in view and proceeding from there would be to begin to do justice to the profundity of Simmel's interpretation of modern culture.

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