

What is Culture? Kant and Simmel *¿Qué es la cultura? Kant y Simmel*

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Abstract

Immanuel Kant and Georg Simmel both lived in different cultural atmospheres. While the former is the one who reflects upon the enlightenment era with criticism and hope, the latter evaluates capitalism and the industrial era with apathetic criticism. However, both of them have managed to philosophically grasp the phenomenon of culture in its universality and true meaning. This text aims at identifying the parallels between the spirits of both eras.

Keywords

Kant, Simmel, culture, critique of culture, society

If we were to say that someone is *the child of its era*, we would mean that s/he reflects, represents, and defines the contours of reality in which the human spirit is manifest. This could be said about the German philosopher Immanuel Kant as well as the German sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel. We call them *children of their era* not only because they were the prodigy of their respective times, but because they had asked the most basic and most simple questions, just like children use to. Those questions were topical and modern. They were able to carefully reveal the most delicate shades of reality and present them in the form of interesting philosophical opinions.

This paper is an attempt at an interpretive and analytical dialogue between the thinkers Simmel and Kant with the focus put on the problem of culture and society. This

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direct relationship between the two almost never appears in relevant literature in spite of the fact that Simmel clearly acknowledged the influence of the thinker from Königsberg. As proof, several of his works could be listed: he had received his doctorate for his work *The Essence of Mater According to Kant's Physical Monadology* (Das Wesen der Materie nach Kants physiker Monadologie, 1881)¹, *Kant*. Sixteen lectures at the University of Berlin (1904), *Kant and Goethe* (Kant und Goethe) (1906). The influence of Kant is also acknowledged by Simmel in his seminal works such as *Philosophy of Money* (Philosophie des Geldes, 1900), *Philosophical Culture* (Philosophische Kultur. Gesammelte Essays, 1911), as well as in his famous treatise *How is Society Possible?*.

When it comes to the examination of the philosophical ties between two thinkers, one may approach this subject by pointing out the proof of this connection in the form of the former acknowledging the latter, and vice versa. However, one might try to approach this analysis by reflecting upon what is not spoken – by finding an indirect ideological connecting between the thinkers in question. The first approach is realized by Simmel's acknowledgement of Kant's influence in his noetic and methodological dimensions of the philosophy of culture and society. This paper, however, also attempts to identify the influence of Kant's philosophy of culture and philosophy of history in Simmel's concepts. The following text localizes the philosophical connection between the aforementioned thinkers in the areas of *cultural theory*, *philosophy of history*, *noetic of society* and with respect to *the issue of ethics and society* as well.

Simmel managed to capture the experience of modernism in a unique way. Simmel's ability to *feel the time of the modern age* was anticipated by various preconditions such as his wide range of scientific interest, ranging from history, ethnography, through psychology and art history, to philosophy and the newly-emerging sociology.² The time and space in which Simmel created his reasoning was also of paramount importance. That was because the urbanization and industrialization of cities such as Berlin had created a setting where human behavior and interpersonal relationships were subjected to notable changes. Another precondition for Simmel's work, which he also acknowledges, was the influence of Kant's transcendentalism within its *noetic*, *historical* and *sociological dimensions*. It is, of course, necessary to also mention the influence of neo-Kantianism (Rickert, Windelband, and Weber), but also Goethe, Hegel, Nietzsche, Begson, as well as others in art history.

Simmel's approach is termed *formal sociology*, along with its attributes such as *neo-Kantian*, *a priori*, and "*sociological impressionism*" (Frisby). The culture which interests Simmel is the culture in its most basic philosophical understanding, including its anthropological, psychological, ethical, and metaphysical aspects. He does not discuss culture in its political or historical sense.

¹ He had been given the title *Privat-dozent* in Berlin for his lecture on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant in January 1885.

² According to Simmel's desciple, György Lukács, we may identify his thought process within the scope of these disciplines: *philosophy (of life)* – *philosophy of history* – *sociology* – *aesthetics*.

Instead, Simmel offers *the dialectical theory of culture*. What he finds in culture is the polarity of *the subjective life that is unyielding, but finite, and, when it has been created, by its content which is rigid and universally valid*. Simmel identifies the basis of human culture in a unique way. His definition of culture uses the abstract term of the spirit³ as being something that is humanly subjective, interior. What is important in understanding culture is that it emerges from the contact between two elements of which neither one contains it – *the subjective spirit and the objective spiritual creation*. Simmel defines culture as –

way that leads from closed unity through the unfolded multiplicity to the unfolded unity (Simmel 1968, p. 29).

A similar thought process is employed by Kant in *The Critique of Pure Reason*.

Pure reason, then, contains, not indeed in its speculative, but in its practical, or, more strictly, its moral use, principles of the possibility of experience, of such actions, namely, as, in accordance with ethical precepts, might be met with in the history of man. For since reason commands that such actions should take place, it must be possible for them to take place; and hence a particular kind of systematic unity - the moral - must be possible (AA III:524).

Both in Kant and in Simmel, the proof that being cultivated is not what true culture is can be found. While Kant says that to be civilized is to be quasi moral, in a similar manner, Simmel says that the cultivated skills and knowledge can become cultured only when spiritually centralized – morally and practically interiorized.

Skill and work diligence have *market value*; cunning, imagination, and whimsy have *affective value*; but, as Kant further emphasized, that which creates the condition under which it can only be purpose in-itself, does not merely possess value that is relative, meaning cost, but what it also possess is inner value – dignity (Belás 2012, p. 46).

All knowledge, virtuosity, and kindness are merely weak appendices if they are only enacted on the outside, purposefully, measurably.

In such a case, a person has aspects of cultivation, but they are not yet cultivated; for the latter occurs only if the elements absorbed from the supra-personal sphere appear to be developing within the psyche, as if through a predetermined harmony (Simmel 1968, p. 29).

On the other hand, culture cannot be something individual, something inherent; that is not enough. Having said that, the parallel with Kant's moral law can thus be established.

³ This spirit is not meant in any religious or Christian sort of way.

However, on the level of individual psychological consciousness, this does not yet make up culture. It becomes culture only by the objectification of moral self-control, by coming in contact with something outside of myself; therefore, it can become culture chiefly within society. The wholeness of morality is affirmed in its practical embodiment.

The essence and the process of culture, in terms of Simmel, can be thought of as *the objectification of the subject* as well as *the subjectification of the object*. It is the way in which our subjective spirit, our inner aggregate, is being objectivized into the variety of its creation and content. In order for the subjective spirit to eventually return to itself, it also has to cultivate itself in this impersonal sphere. The realization of this activity, this task, softens, even disrupts the tension between our theoretical and practical world, a connection that was sought after by Kant as well.

Simmel confirms his noetic inspiration by Kant in his study called *How is Society Possible?* where, as he states, he paraphrases Kant's question – *How is Nature Possible?*⁴ Similarly to Kant, Simmel approaches his question by *searching for the a priori conditions* for cognition and knowledge. While asking the question regarding the possibility of our cognition of society and culture, the sociologist Simmel asks it in a philosophical manner. Simmel, same as Kant, poses the most basic of questions before submitting the object in question to a more rigorous analysis.

In answering the aforementioned question he emphasizes the difference between nature and society:

The decisive difference between the unity of a society and that of nature, however, is this: the latter-according to the Kantian standpoint here presupposed-comes to existence exclusively in the contemplating unity (Subject), it is produced exclusively by that mind upon and out of the sense materials which are not in themselves interconnected. On the contrary, the societal unity is realized by its elements without further mediation, and with no need of an observer, because these elements are consciously and synthetically active (Simmel 1910, p. 373).

Society and culture are thus realized by the synthesis of active subjects and their relationships. By contrast, nature is "created" by our thought, meaning that our thinking is not affected by objects, but rather molds them in accordance with itself. Firstly, Simmel had established the regulative principle of interaction and the connection among all the phenomena interiorized within society. The subject of sociology is not society as an object, but the interaction and relationships of its individual constituents (Frisby 1984, p. 37). Simmel himself acknowledged that searching for some kind of a general and a priori basis for societal and cultural processes had been the central principle of his sociology.

The latter question is to be answered by the forms of cognition, through which the mind synthesizes given elements into "nature." The former question is answered by the

⁴ Kant asks this in his [Transcendental Analytic](#) as well as in *The Critique of Pure Reason*.

conditions residing a priori in the elements themselves, through which they combine themselves actually into the synthesis "society" (Simmel 1910, p. 376).

One of the *a priori conditions* of recognizing society is *the image a person that another person acquires*. A human being constitutes a fragment not only of a person in general, but of his/her individuality as well. So when I see a human being I perceive him/her as a person in general and his/her individuality as well.

Another a priori thing is summarized in Simmel's sentence: Each element of a group is not a societal part, but beyond that something else. In this condition, again through the dualistic structure, Simmel defines the social apriority of the duality of an individual. On one hand, a person is directed towards society, on the other hand, s/he is trying to exclude oneself from society, to set oneself apart from it. Both of these tendencies are contradictory, yet conditioned. The existence outside of society (character, temperament, feelings) is met with a specific social categorization within a human being. Anticipating the rise of capitalism, Simmel points out the perception of a human being as a seller or a buyer with a small measure of an individual life with persona characteristics.

Kant approaches *unsocial sociability*⁵ in a similar manner when he talks about this contradictory tendency as being the dynamic force behind society. Simmel addresses the individual spirit as something that exists within society and also exists outside of it; something that respects order, yet defies it.

Both Kant and Simmel assert this tendency as being a positive condition. I would dare to say it is particularly modern. With respect to this condition, Simmel had identified the extreme nature of modern capitalist relations at the beginning of the 20th century, when he emphasized that a person in such a system is closing on the ideal objectivity, thus repressing individuality in social relationships. A person thus becomes the manufacturer, the buyer, the seller, and, currently, the consumer that is, consequently, reduced to a mere label without any interior world or shades of a critically thinking personality.

The third a priori condition of society that Simmel defines in his essay is the *bureaucratic reality of a certain order of predetermined positions and actions*. One's place in a societal whole is the condition for an individual experiencing social life. Simmel terms this place in society a profession. A profession offers a place and a form for the spirit – individual consciousness – to have the opportunity to become a link in the chain of society as an element of the social.

According to Simmel, social life as such is based on the premise of principal harmony between the individuals and societal whole. Again, here a link not clearly acknowledged by Simmel that can be found. Simmel arrives at the same concept as Kant had, however, by using a different approach – the notion of an ideal society.

Kant's claim that we create objects when the process of cognition is already under way is the central premise of Simmel's philosophy of history, and is described in this work *The Problems of the Philosophy of History* (Die Probleme der Geschichtphilosophie,

⁵ In *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*. (AA VIII:20)

1892). It is necessary to emphasize that Simmel is not interested in the traditional understanding of Kant's philosophy of history that is embodied in his *Kleine Schriften* in its moral and practical depiction. His object of interest is made up of Kant's noetic conclusions. Simmel accentuates the psychologism of historical investigation – "Psychology is a priori history." He declares that Kant's philosophy constitutes a milestone between the classic projects of the philosophy of history and the so called methodical, noetic approach in the philosophy of history.⁶

All of the exterior events, political and social, economic, religious, legal and technical can interest me and allow me to grasp them only when they emerge not from the spirit, but when they send ripples through it⁷ (Simmel 1905, p. 1).

All of the evolutionary levels appear as diverse paths through which the spirit reaches itself. Simmel again praises Kant when he writes:

Kant was right to have been critical to the empiricists who wanted to limit the study of history to a mere record of sensory perception and the registering of reality. He has shown that without metaphysical examination, knowledge would be incomplete⁸ (Simmel 1905, p. 4).

Simmel had issued a challenge for historiography not to entirely abide by the method of empirical knowledge because only nature can be studied in such a way. Culture and society in the confines of history is something different than the inactive and soulless nature. The philosophy of history as well as historiography (and certainly sociology) must accommodate its acts of reasoning to certain a priori components.

In formulating his philosophy of history, Simmel was not engaged by Kant's classic project of the philosophy of history; instead, he had adapted the method of historical cognition that can be found in Kant's thought. It is perfectly legitimate and does not diminish the importance of the classic Kantian philosophy of history because the tendency in the philosophy of history between the 19th and 20th century was embedded in epistemological and methodological aspects of historical investigation.

At a glance, Simmel's concept of society and culture, the theory of money, seemingly ignores or overlooks morality. On the contrary, as with Kant, Simmel's

⁶ Simmel calls it the theory of knowing history (die Erkenntnistheorie der Historik).

⁷ Simmel writes in the original: „Alle äußeren Vorgänge, politische und soziale, wirtschaftliche und religiöse, rechtliche und technische würden uns weder interessant noch verständlich sein, wenn sie nicht aus Seelenbewegungen hervorgingen und Seelenbewegungen hervorriefen.“ (Simmel 1905, p. 1)

⁸ Simmel writes in the original: „Kant hat mit vollem Recht seinen kritischen Scharfsinn gegen die Empiristen aufgeboden, welche ihre Forschungen auf das bloße Aufnehmen von sinnlichen Eindrücken, auf das Registrieren unmittelbar beweislicher Tatsächlichkeiten beschränken wollten; er hat gezeigt, daß sie, ohne es selbst zu merken, fortwährend von unbewiesenen metaphysischen.“ (Simmel 1905, p. 4)

philosophy was a very specific and patient process. In 1918, a few months before his death, he was finishing his metaphysical and ethical reflections.⁹ They are called *The View of Life (Lebensanschauung)* and they are composed of a collection of questions and problems of looking at life (in four chapters). The questions and answers which Simmel pondered towards the end of his life were influenced by his life's conclusion (realizing his own death) but mostly his disappointment and helplessness he felt on account of the events that have transpired during World War I. He scrutinized Kant's categorical imperative which he claimed was being too egalitarian and not enough individual. That was because Kant's categorical imperative is universally valid but only for all individuals' separate actions. Simmel's *Individual Law* is special for each individual but universal for each and every one of his/her acts.

Simmel contradicts Kant's imperative as well as its logic and practical application. Instead, he emphasizes that it is artificial and ignorant to the flow of life. A moral life is purposeful only when in contact with another life. The mentioned critique of Kant emerges from Simmel's overall philosophy of culture where the synthesis of an individual life and society is accentuated. On one hand, his critique of Kant's ethics might be partially accepted; on the other hand, this critique might be contested because Kant's moral law has its practical embodiment in his social philosophy. These claims, however, deserve a deeper analysis than this article.

Conclusion

The introduction to Simmel's book *Philosophische Kultur* (Simmel 1919, p. 6) offers an example of this attitude. Here Simmel states that man, in spite of all his efforts, has not yet found the answer to many questions which have troubled him for thousands of years. Simmel, however, urges us not to get discouraged and invites us to ponder the meaning of the following fable. On his deathbed a farmer tells his children that a treasure of great value lies buried in the fields belonging to the family. Upon their return from the father's grave the sons begin to plough the land. They dig in vain. The treasure remains undiscovered. Only the following year, when they realize that as a result of their arduous and seemingly futile efforts the soil has become enriched and yields a threefold harvest of fruit, do they understand what their father meant when he hinted at hidden wealth. According to Simmel the fable symbolizes the challenge to the human mind. We must go on groping for answers, even if the treasure can never be unearthed and even if there should not be any treasure. For only by ploughing the soil in which knowledge and wisdom can grow will the human mind fulfill itself and attain the enrichment it is destined to attain.

⁹ In the letter to his friend Hermann Graf Keyserling he writes: „I now ponder important metaphysical and ethical ideas and I must finish them, they could be my testament.“ (Silver 2007, p. 265).

When nowadays one reads and ponders Simmel's legacy, one can find the tragedy of culture in life. In the culturally over-ripe and exhausted epochs, culture is seen as a certain softening (diversion, comforting, beautification) of life. A person no longer has the opportunity to find solace and nourishment in this formally-subjective culture because there is no firm concept, no firm value. What an individual chooses from an innumerable amount of components are only the ones that are fleeting, relative.

From social norms only socially acceptable behavior, from art only unyealding benefit, and from technological development only the negative comfort of the passage of ordinary days¹⁰ (Simmel 1919, p. 235).

But how to philosophically break through this mentioned dichotomy, hybridization, and ambiguity of culture. One of the ways how to approach this problem philosophically is to adapt the stance of Georg Simmel.

Simmel's approach reminds us of Kant's understanding of culture because culture is not a part of the trifold model politics – economics – culture, but rather – *Totalitätsorientierten Kulturbegriff* – an all-encompassing space. This stance leads to a shift in the degree of importance: culture is thus not politically determined, but politics is only of several cultural forms. As it is known, Simmel speaks of the tragedy of culture. Simmel's analysis identifies a barrier in the purpose of culture which the previous generations did not have to face: continuous changes and the overproduction of cultural product. Overproduction, the division of labor, manufacturing goods, creating new demand for individuals, or the creation of cultural product for one's own benefit – that is the real tragedy.

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¹⁰ „Hier kann sich die individuelle Entwicklung aus den sozialen Normen nur noch das gesellschaftlich gute Benehmen, aus den Künsten nur noch den unproduktiven Genuss, aus den technischen Fortschritten nur noch das Negative der. Mühelosigkeit und Glätte des Tagesverlaufes herausholen - es entsteht eine Art formal-subjektiver Kultur, ohne jene innere Verwebung mit dem Sachelement, durch die der Begriff einer konkreten Kultur sich erst erfüllt.“ (Simmel 1919, p. 235)

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