

Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge

Volume 3

Issue 1 *Sociology of Self-Knowledge: Course Topic as well as Pedagogical Strategy*

Article 15

1-1-2004

Contrasting Simmel's and Marx's Ideas on Alienation

Jorge Capetillo-Ponce

University of Massachusetts Boston, jorge.capetillo@umb.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Capetillo-Ponce, Jorge (2004) "Contrasting Simmel's and Marx's Ideas on Alienation," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 15.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture/vol3/iss1/15>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact library.uasc@umb.edu.



Contrasting Simmel's and Marx's Ideas on Alienation

Jorge Capetillo-Ponce

UMass Boston

In *The Philosophy of Money* (1990), and especially in its last chapter entitled "The Style of Life," Simmel presents one of the first sociological analyses of the various modes of experiencing modernity, introducing a theory of alienation that places it within the context of modern cultural developments. For Simmel, alienation is rooted in the notion of objective spirit, a spirit that embodies a reified objective culture and a reified world of monetary relationships. Each individual's opportunity to create and to develop becomes increasingly restricted by intellectualization, rationalization (including the sphere of law), and the "calculating exactness" of modern times. Alienation represents a fateful vicissitude in the relationship between subjects and objects; it expresses on the one hand their mutual dependency, and on the other their tendency to diverge. Simmel sees a discrepant relationship between objective and subjective culture, based on the repeated, frustrating failure of subjects and objects to acknowledge one another:

It follows that in society at large only a certain proportion of objective cultural values become subject-

ive values. If one looks at society as a whole, that is if one arranges the objectified intellectuality in a temporal-objective complex, then the whole cultural development, assuming it has a uniform representative, is richer in content than each of its elements. For the achievement of each element is incorporated in the total heritage, but this heritage does not permeate each element. The entire life-style of a community depends upon the relationship between the objectified culture and the culture of the subjects. (Simmel 1990: 453)

That is, the objective spirit can be embodied in and assimilated by the individual only to a limited degree. Even such embodiment as does occur leaves other aspects of subjectivity such as the emotional development of the individual stunted and unrefined by, for example, the potential influence of the artistic experience. Simmel believes that the divergence of the subjective and objective factors can be explained by a single cause: the division of labor, which causes the advancement and glorification of the objective mind while the subjective mind retreats and is devalued. Result: the individual inevitably grows egoistic and selfish. The division of labor as it impacts both consumption and production, in turn leads Simmel to his ideas on alienation:

The increase in psycho-physical energies and skills, which is the result of specialized activity, is of little value for the total personality, which often becomes stunted because of the diversion of energies that are indispensable for the harmonious growth of the self. In other cases, it develops as if cut off from the core of the personality, as a province with unlimited autono-

my whose fruits do not flow back to the center. Experience seems to show that the inner wholeness of the self basically evolves out of interaction with the uniformity and the completion of our life task ... Whenever our energies do not produce something whole as a reflection of the total personality, then the proper relationship between subject and object is missing. (Simmel 1990: 454)

As the extreme opposite of this model of alienation, and as a way of developing completely the subjective side of the individual's spirit—and with this he also offers a way of measuring alienation by the content of subjectivity or objectivity in an individual—Simmel offers us the work of art. It is the nature of art to completely resist that subdivision of labor among a number of workers which keeps each from achieving his or her own unity. As Simmel points out, “the work of art, of all the works of man, is the most perfectly autonomous unity, a self-sufficient totality. The work of art requires only one single person, but it requires him totally, right down to his innermost core” (Simmel 1990: 454-455).

Thus, for Simmel, an immersion in the artistic experience entails a complete rejection of the division of labor, and this rejection is both cause and symptom of the proper connection between the autonomous totality of the art work and the “unity of the spirit,” an ideal realm for Simmel. Conversely, where division of labor prevails, the achievement becomes incommensurable with the achiever. He or she can no longer find him/herself expressed in the work. Its form has grown alien to the subjective mind, appearing as a wholly specialized part of our being that is indifferent to the total unity of man. The result, again, is alienation.

Simmel seems very close here to Marx, so perhaps the time is now right to offer a

comparison of the two's thinking. In the manuscript *Alienated Labor*, Marx offers “moments” (based on Hegel's “phases”) in the development of self-consciousness. The first moment occurs when man becomes involved in his “species-life.” Nature is constructed through his work, so it appears as “his work” and “his reality.” The second moment brings in his famous concept of alienation. Man is alienated from himself, from other men, and from reality. He is not a man anymore, he is a mere “physical existence.” Private property is the expression of his alienation, because through it objects attain a value independent of whatever men may put into them through their work. Here we have a process in which externalized consciousness is man projected onto objects—the result, yet again, being alienation. But for Marx there is also a third moment: the attainment of communism through revolution, when a complete abolition of private property induces a harmony among reality, objects, and human needs, thus creating Marx's paradise on earth.

In notable contrast to Marx's, Simmel's paradise clearly is situated on the subjective and artistic side of life. Yet if his “third moment” seems a world away from Marx's, many of his formulations strike one as being very close to Marx's first two moments. For instance, Simmel contrasts custom production with mass production (and thus premodern with modern civilization). Whereas the former gave the consumer a personal relationship to the commodity, for the latter the commodity is something external to and independent of the consumer. Simmel also sees the individual as becoming estranged not only from the wider cultural milieu but also from the more intimate aspects of daily life. One reason for this is the dramatic increase in the sheer quantity of commodities available, which Simmel refers to as “consecutive differentiation,” and which reaches its peak with the five and ten cent store and the slot machine (where price rather than product condi-

tions the desire of acquiring it); with the “concurrent differentiation” of commodities as manifested in fashions; and the plurality of styles that confront the individual as objective entities.

In order to better bring each author’s distinctive view of the world into focus, let us examine their respective conceptions of money. For Simmel, money is the reification of the pure relationship between things as expressed in their economic motion. Money creates an objectivity that stands over against individuals as a natural entity:

But since money itself is an omnipresent means, the various elements of our existence are thus placed in an all-embracing teleological nexus in which no element is either the first or the last. Furthermore, since money measures all objects with merciless objectivity, and since its standard of value so measured determines their relationship, a web of objective and personal aspects of life emerges which is similar to the natural cosmos with its continuous cohesion and strict causality. This web is held together by the all-pervasive money-value, just as nature is held together by energy that gives life to everything. (Simmel 1990: 453)

This supra-individual world as a culture of things confronts the individual as something alien, even though, in the last analysis, it is not objects but people and the relations between people, who carry on these processes. This “objectivity of human interaction” finds its highest (or lowest) expression in purely monetary economic interests. It is also manifested in the intellectualization and functionalization of relationships. And finally Simmel, after drawing a series of parallels between intellectualization, rationalization, the law, and that calculating exactness of modern life—

fruit of the development of a mature money economy—offers us a critique and a tradition to which he himself adheres:

The calculating intellectuality embodied in these forms may in its turn derive from them some of its energy through which intellectuality controls modern life. All these relationships are brought into focus by the negative example of those type of thinkers who are most strongly opposed to the economic interpretation of human affairs: Goethe, Carlyle and Nietzsche on the one hand are fundamentally anti-intellectual and on the other completely reject that mathematically exact interpretation of nature which we recognize as the theoretical counterpart to the institution of money. (Simmel 1990: 446)

While these words seem to make of Simmel a late German Romantic (for example, his idealization of art reminds us of Nietzsche’s early idealization of Wagner’s music), one can not deny that his view of the role of money in society is similar to that of Marx’s. For Marx money infinitely intensifies labor’s dependency on capital and “mystifies” all economic relationships (in contrast, Simmel’s goal in *The Philosophy of Money* is precisely to explain this mystification). Communism, by abolishing private property, money, and the division of labor, overcomes this alienation and restores the “human” content of labor and economic activity. It can do so, however, only in so far as it can finally become a “genuine humanist communism” that totally overcomes the whole conception of property and replaces it with free, conscious, creative social activity.

It seems clear as well that the concept of alienation is of comparable significance in both Simmel and Marx’s views about

modern society—at any rate as far as Marx’s early writings are concerned. Finally, there are some impressive similarities of form and substance between their respective arguments. To give just an example, in *The German Ideology*, Marx states that:

Individuals have always built on themselves ... But in the course of historical evolution, and precisely through the inevitable fact that within the division of labor social relationships take on an independent existence, there appears a division within the life of each individual, insofar as it is personal and insofar as it is determined by some branch of labour and the conditions pertaining to it. (*Marx-Engels Reader* 1978: 198-199)

Here Marx is telling us that individuals always take themselves as points of departure. Their relations are relations of their real life process. How does it happen, then, that individuals’ relations acquire autonomy over and against the individuals themselves—that the powers of their existence overpower them? Simmel explores this issue in a passage remarkably similar to Marx’s:

How can one explain this phenomenon? If all the culture of things is, as we saw, nothing but a culture of people, so that we develop ourselves only by developing things, then what does that development, elaboration and intellectualization of objects mean, which seems to evolve out of these objects’ own powers and norms without correspondingly developing the individual mind?

Differentiating Simmel from Marx, however, are these words which immediately follow the preceding quote:

This implies an accentuation of the enigmatic relationship that prevails between social life and its products on the one hand, and the fragmentary life-contents of individuals on the other. (Simmel 1990: 449)

In our first two passages we saw the similarity between Simmel and Marx, but here we discover a significant difference. For Simmel, while modernity both intensifies the experience of alienation and widens its reach, alienation is a phenomenon inherent in the human condition, an enigmatic relationship, something we have to learn to live with. Unlike Marx, he sees no possibility of transcending this situation through revolution. Philosophically speaking, Simmel construes alienation as a variable but unavoidable psychological feature of the relationship between the subjective and objective spirits.

As seen from another angle, Marx thought of alienation as resting on expropriation, with direct producers being forcibly deprived of control over their products. Such a situation could conceivably be turned around. For Simmel, alienation is a less clear-cut matter. Any given manifestation of it constitutes a particular vicissitude of the relationship an individual has to a set of objects, and conceptually speaking, while that vicissitude may be probable it is not necessary, nor is it always irreversible.

In Marx we find an interest in the inner workings of the capitalist system, how its inner dynamism was unfolding in the direction of an ultimate collapse through the antagonism of social classes, particularly the capitalists and the proletarians. While Simmel is interested in the interactional relationships to be found in an economy based on a seemingly “neutral” element such as money, he has no real interest in the internal logic of this economy. We find in him no argument as to why any fundamen-

tal change should take place. We find a nostalgia, a romantic flavor, very similar to his friend Max Weber's, regarding the so-called modernist development, and a concern over the loss of human freedom through the terrorization of the soul by the intellect. In short, for Simmel as for Weber, the soul, the subject, is no longer master in its own house.

Although Simmel implicitly agrees with Marx in seeing economic alienation as a phenomenon central to modern society, each construes somewhat differently the role that money plays in it. One might say that for Marx alienation arises from the relationship between three entities, none of which he thinks of as being primarily "made of money": (1) the factory, as the visible embodiment of capital; (2) labor power, vested in the worker but necessarily sold for a wage; and (3) the commodity produced by means of wage labor. Money figures here only as the indispensable link connecting these three entities, as nothing less but also as nothing more. For Simmel, money is far more the driver of economic alienation. Marx not only emphasizes economic alienation but also tends to derive from it other forms of alienation such as the political and the religious. Simmel resolutely places money, and thus economic alienation, at the center of his picture of modern society. Thus it would seem that Simmel's analysis of money relations in *The Philosophy of Money*, if taken as an account of the world of commodities, might form a foundation for a Marxist phenomenology of experience in a capitalist money economy.

The fundamental difference between these two thinkers is that they address the problem of alienation from two very different standpoints and with very different moral preoccupations. Marx's moral vision is that of a revolutionary thinker who seeks to guide the masses toward the fulfillment of an impossible task: "the solution of the riddle of history," the construction of a totally new society, free of alienation, on the

ruins of the existent one. What chiefly inspires Simmel is a concern for individualistic values. Simmel thus is more "micro" and Marx more "macro" in their respective sociological analyses. Simmel is particularly concerned with those values implicit in the idea of "cultivation": scholarly or scientific attainment, intellectual integrity, and above all, aesthetic sensitivity. What he sees as being above all at stake in modern life, is the individual capacity to reflect on, understand, appreciate, and evaluate the events that impinge upon direct experiences, whether through participation in ordinary life or, better yet, through cultured and creative pursuits.

REFERENCES

- Simmel, G. (1990). *The Philosophy of Money*. Edited by David Frisby. Translated by Tom Bottomore and David Frisby. London and New York: Routledge.
- Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1978). *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Translated by Robert Tucker. New York: W.W. Norton.