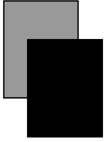

Social psychology and modernity

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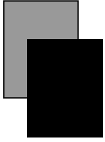


Introduction: social psychology and modernity

What is social psychology?

There are a number of definitions of what social psychology is, or ought to be. Without delving into them too deeply, we can say that the focus of most definitions is on the concept of social interaction. These definitions often include specific and interrelated questions about what is involved when people meet. In some cases, psychological factors affecting the meeting are studied; in other cases, the major focus is on the effects of the social environment. Behavioural and cognitive factors are central to the analyses made in more psychologically oriented textbooks. In an American textbook from 1985, social psychology is defined as follows:

> *Social psychology* is the scientific study of the thoughts, actions and interactions of individuals as affected by the actual, implied, or imagined presence of others. . . . Social stimuli affect the thoughts and motivations of an individual, and these internal or *intrapsychic* factors affect that individual's subsequent interactions with other people.
>
> (Tedeschi *et al.* 1985: 5, original emphasis)

Given this, we can imagine a similar, but sociologically oriented definition focused on the social environment or social institutions. Such a definition appears in a more sociologically oriented textbook from 1981: 'People are products of their environment, but they also help to shape this environment. Social psychology is a science with which the interplay between the individual and his environment is investigated'[1] (Eskola [1971] 1981: 11). Although both of these definitions of social psychology are acceptable, I

would like to claim that when we use such narrow definitions, we miss something of the essence of a dynamic social psychological analysis.

The Swedish social psychologist Johan Asplund has defined social psychology as a science located on the slash between individual and society. This approach to social psychology as an intermediary area opens up a creative discussion of how social psychological studies *can* be carried out. The entire definition is as follows:

> Consider the formula 'individual/society'. What I am trying to say is that social psychology is – or should be – a science on the slash between individual and society. If this were so, it would be a science neither about the wall nor the cracks, but about the cracks in the wall.[2]
>
> (Asplund 1983: 62)

In explaining to us what social psychology is – or ought to be – Asplund uses a metaphor which points out that a complete separation of individual and societal factors is an impossibility. Therefore, we must devise concepts that allow us to move freely between different levels of abstraction and disciplines – concepts that can help us both to understand what social interaction is and, at the same time, to maintain an interest in both psychology and sociology. Thus, in order to carry out social psychological studies, we must formulate ideas that overstep the normal disciplinary boundaries and that capture something of the subtle dynamics implied in Asplund's slash.

Of interest in social psychology is an intermediary area bordering on both psychology and sociology; this area has its own character and concepts. Thus, if we use dramaturgic terminology to describe social psychology, we need a scene, actors and a good story for this type of analysis of human existence to be possible. Many of the processes we attempt to describe and analyse using social psychology are diffuse in nature. This, however, constitutes a challenge for the social psychological imagination. Herbert Blumer summarizes the problems associated with this type of analysis in the following way:

> Or, to put the matter in terms of the concepts of social psychology, we may say that such concepts are vague and ambiguous because the observations that we use to serve them are tenuous and uncertain; and that the observations have this character because of an inability to form dependable judgements and inferences; and, further, that such undependable judgements and inferences are at present intrinsic to many of the kinds of observation which we have to make and use.
>
> (Blumer 1969: 181)

The social psychological concepts we use in order to say something essential about contemporary society are often difficult to operationalize. When we try to mould these concepts into measurable phenomena, they lose part of their relevance for studies of contemporary life. Instead, the purpose of

a social psychological analysis is to further the perspectivistic vision and create the conditions for a dynamic understanding of the relation between 'individual' and 'society'. Thus, those concepts that have been developed are better characterized as 'sensitizing' than as explanatory (Blumer 1954). Blumer describes the contrast between definitive and sensitizing concepts as follows:

> Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look. The hundreds of concepts – like culture, institutions, social structure, mores and personality – are not definitive concepts but are sensitizing in nature. They lack precise reference and have no bench marks which allow a clean-cut identification of a specific instance, and of its content. Instead, they rest on a general sense of what is relevant. There can scarcely be any dispute over this characterization.
>
> (Blumer 1954: 148)

Today's dominant view of what social psychology is differs considerably from Blumer's approach to the subject. The textbooks used in social psychology are often tied to the American, more psychologically oriented tradition. This tradition is largely based on the innumerable experiments that have been, and continue to be, carried out, in which people are subjected to various kinds of physical or psychological influences. The most famous studies in this tradition are, for example, Milgram's obedience experiments, Sherif's group experiments and Asch's conformity studies. Within this variant of social psychology, concepts such as socialization, norm, attitude, self-image, cognitive dissonance and so on are used. These notions are not employed in order to reflect upon people's everyday lives, but rather to define and operationalize various aspects of human existence.

Although my attitude towards this type of social psychology is not totally negative, I have chosen to focus on another tradition. In this tradition, a more consistent approach is used in order to frame questions about, and investigate, people's social situation and identity in relation to what is often called modernity. Before I delve into a more detailed discussion of the various traditions and authors associated with this variant of social psychology – beginning with Georg Simmel's analyses of big city life in Berlin in the year 1900 and continuing to contemporary discussions of modernity/postmodernity – I will briefly describe the growth and breakthrough of modern social psychology.

Modernity and social psychology

The end of the 1800s marked the beginning of social psychological experimentation, and early in the next century, the first two textbooks in the area

were published. One was written by a sociologist and the other by a psychologist.[3] Why did this way of looking at people and society experience its breakthrough during this period in history? According to the Swedish social psychologist Johan Asplund, it was only after an industrialized and differentiated society developed that it became at all interesting to discuss and ask questions about the relation between the individual and society. It has, of course, been possible to consider this relation earlier in history. However, it was at the end of the 1800s that we were first able to discern more radical changes in this relation and a clear and more general focus on the individual's place in society, and when the development of a scientific discipline and approach – intended solely to deal with these complex relations – became relevant.

As social psychology grew and developed as a discipline, it was perhaps unavoidable that scientists began to take an interest in how individuals reacted to the social changes being studied. If we want to attribute the growth of modern social psychology to a certain point in time, we might choose the year 1892, when the world's first department of sociology was founded in Chicago. Many influential scientists worked here: for example, Albion Small, who helped to translate Georg Simmel's work; Charles Cooley, one of the founders of symbolic interactionism; and Robert Park, who built up an entire research programme in the spirit of Simmel's work; even George Herbert Mead worked at the same university. But why Chicago?

At the end of the 1800s, Chicago experienced a relatively rapid transformation into a world-class metropolis. Urbanization and immigration contributed to the shaping of an urban environment marked by pronounced differentiation of the city milieu, as well as of the people living there. We might say that most of the kinds of problems in which sociologists have taken an interest over the years – urbanization, individualization, the breakdown of the family, gang crime, youth culture, multiculturalism and so on – were concentrated in one and the same place. This combination of a creative and intellectually versatile research environment and a historical situation characterized by constant change, contributed to the creation of the conditions from which a certain type of social psychology – deeply rooted in the American culture – could develop. This mixture of philosophical speculations and ethnographic studies of strategically chosen urban cultures and social types, which characterized Chicago's intellectual environment at the time, also proved to be quite successful. It is here that we can see the roots of both symbolic interactionism and a social psychology more oriented towards cultural studies.

There would seem to be a strong connection between sweeping social change and the development of successful social psychological perspectives. While scientists in Chicago were busy with their field studies and theoretical exchanges about the interactionist point of view during the 1920s and

1930s, an intellectual environment was developing in Frankfurt, Germany. Specific to the situation in which the German researchers worked was that their society would soon begin to develop into a Fascist, totalitarian state, in which all types of intellectual and critical thinking were banned. In this environment, and in the USA, where many of these scientists sought refuge before the war broke out, a type of social psychology developed that was philosophically oriented and extremely multifaceted. If the incomprehensible events of this troubled time in history were to be understood at all – if there was to be a chance of comprehending how people could be transformed into brutal monsters – it was necessary to analyse the relation between social change and psychological factors. The social psychology that grew out of this period was marked largely by pessimism about society's subsequent development. In this book, I will return now and then to the question of social psychology's ties to psychoanalysis and different attempts to relate social change to psychoanalytic theory.

If we move on to the post-war period, we find that social psychology had become more pluralistic. Symbolic interactionism constituted an almost self-contained intellectual tradition, where a specific kind of social psychological thinking developed. At the same time, the direction that had evolved in the Frankfurt school inspired various attempts to develop this type of social psychology. We can also observe increased polarization between the more sociologically and psychologically oriented approaches to social psychology. The former variant developed more and more within the framework of sociology and in terms of problems related to actor/structure, whereas textbooks with 'social psychology' in the title tended to focus on a more psychologically oriented social psychology and certain aspects of symbolic interactionism.

As I see it, discussions of modernity have always had strong ties to social psychology. This becomes even clearer during the 1980s and 1990s, a period in which discussions of the character of modernity were revitalized. This renewal was largely dependent on the postmodern attack on the project of modernity. During this period, many books were written in which concepts such as identity, reflexivity, life project, ambivalence, risk and so on were given a partly new meaning. This revitalized theoretical interest in discussions of modernity has taken place against a backdrop of drastic changes in world politics, increased awareness about threats to the environment and human survival, and tendencies towards increased xenophobia (fear or hatred of strangers or foreigners) and neo-poverty that characterize the political climate towards the end of the twentieth century. Getting a grip on this historical transformation requires the development of a social psychological thinking that enables us to theorize about, among other things, the growth of the media, the multicultural society, postcolonialism and globalization.

In order to deepen our understanding of what is meant by contemporary social psychology, we will take a closer look at three different studies and

use them as our point of departure for an analysis of the connection between social psychology and modernity.

Three social psychological studies

How is social psychology carried out?

The three cornerstones of a social psychological analysis are: individual/actor, social interaction and society/culture. In order to determine what constitutes a good social psychological study, we must consider in every case how well the author has dealt with the dynamic relation between these three factors. According to the point of view presented in this book, good social psychology is done by a researcher who is able to bring into focus what happens during a specific meeting between people. This must be accomplished without reducing the meeting to individual thoughts, feelings and experiences, or to a cultural process.

The three studies I will present in brief are all tied to historically specific analyses of modernity. The first study, *The Ghetto*, was written by Louis Wirth. It was part of an extensive mapping of the city of Chicago that was carried out within the framework of the so-called Chicago school during the 1920s and 1930s. Within this tradition, we find a number of similar studies dealing with everything from the homeless to youth gangs.[4] The second study, entitled *The Authoritarian Personality*, was the result of a far-reaching research project that was carried out by scientists tied to the Frankfurt school. This study was unique in that the researchers, in an attempt to understand the growth of Fascism and xenophobia, tried to combine psychoanalytical theory and social theory. Enormous attention was given to the study, and it brings to the fore both the advantages and disadvantages of this type of approach. Finally, we will look at Anthony Giddens' *The Transformation of Intimacy*. Giddens' point of departure is the concept of institutional reflexivity, which he uses to discuss and analyse contemporary relational patterns. Although these three studies are typical of the different time periods in which they were undertaken, there are certain similarities between them that, in my opinion, make them excellent examples of how social psychology can be carried out.

The ghetto and the stranger

Louis Wirth published his study on the ghetto in 1928. *The Ghetto* provides the reader with a history of the growth of the ghetto. In medieval Europe, Jewish neighbourhoods were called ghettos. The origin of this segregation was not the result of planning, but rather of a spontaneous search for security and cultural similarity. With time, however, the ghetto became institutionalized and, thereby, a tool that could be used by those in power to control and oppress the Jews. Wirth's interest is in how this institution has

changed in different environments and at different historical points in time. His primary focus is on Chicago Jews and their adaptation to American culture at the beginning of this century.

Ghettos arise when people try to adapt themselves to what are often hostile environments. Ghettos also make it easier for the powers that be to control the strangers, while creating the conditions for solidarity between vulnerable people and for resistance against oppression. Simmel would have called the ghetto a *social form*. This social institution offered a secure environment with a solid internal hierarchy, and the regularization of social status and family life. The Jewish culture was safeguarded and formed within the ghetto's 'walls'. Wirth writes that: 'The ghetto is not only a physical fact; it is also a state of mind' (Wirth 1928: 8). It is this particular 'state of mind' that Jews carry with them on their worldwide wanderings and that results in the more or less spontaneous formation of Jewish ghettos.

Wirth provides us with a detailed description of the Jewish ghetto in Chicago. He takes us to a bygone world of shopkeepers, beggars, rabbis, conflicts between Jews and Poles, odours from the markets and a culture that would slowly but surely dissolve. We find thorough descriptions of the various social types who appeared on Maxwell Street, which was the main Jewish thoroughfare in Chicago during the 1920s. Among others, we meet the beggar (*Schnorrer*), who confirmed the religious Jews' identity by accepting gifts, and we meet *the puller*, who was an expert at stopping pedestrians and getting them to try various products in which they were actually not at all interested. Wirth describes Maxwell Street, where all these people met and were integrated, as follows:

> The noises of crowing roosters and geese, the cooing of pigeons, the barking of dogs, the twittering of canary birds, the smell of garlic and of cheeses, the aroma of onions, apples, and oranges, and the shouts and curses of sellers and buyers fill the air. Anything can be bought and sold on Maxwell Street. . . . Everything has value on Maxwell Street, but the price is not fixed. It is the fixing of the price around which turns the whole plot of the drama enacted daily at the perpetual bazaar of Maxwell Street.
>
> (Wirth 1928: 233)

Little by little, the Jews began to take an interest in the opportunities offered by American society. Wirth describes the successive dissolution of the ghetto as a physical place. Life on Maxwell Street was transformed when new groups moved in and took over these city neighbourhoods. However, although the Jews were integrated into the city, much of their distrust of non-Jews (*Goyims*) lived on, and they tried to preserve their customs and culture. After having attempted to adapt to new manners and customs, it was not uncommon for Jews to return to the synagogue and to Jewish customs. Many of the Jews who left the ghetto experienced a constant internal conflict and

found it difficult to adapt to the 'world outside'. They lived in two worlds simultaneously, without feeling really at home in either of them.

The American Jews were often met with prejudices, contempt and, at times, open hostility. In order to deal with these threats, they were forced to unite. The solidarity that had developed within 'the walls' of the ghetto continued to exist outside the ghetto in the form of a mental and social state. Wirth describes how Chicago Jews collected money for various causes and how they were loyally committed to different Jewish questions. The cosmopolitan Jew always has one foot in the ghetto. He or she is drawn to what the world has to offer, but the security and culture that developed in the ghetto constitutes an important source of personal identity.

Wirth's study of the ghetto is certainly worth reading today. He succeeds in conveying images of a bygone culture, and at the same time in capturing some of the social psychological mechanisms that are engaged when people are exposed to external threats. By providing us with a historical background, careful descriptions of environments and social types, and by conveying various people's stories of how they adapted to life in, and outside, the ghetto, Wirth helps us to understand how the distinction between 'we' and 'them' develops and is maintained in different historical contexts. He offers insights into both the mechanisms of oppression and the social psychology of resistance.

The Authoritarian Personality

Studies of the authoritarian personality had begun during the 1930s. Much empirical material was collected under the direction of Erich Fromm. The idea was to study the reaction of the German working class to the growing Fascist ideology. Although never published, this study – which was based largely on a type of psychoanalytic thinking elaborated by Fromm and others – resulted in a number of books, for example, Fromm's famous study, *Escape from Freedom* (Fromm 1969). Another great theoretical and empirical project, which was a foundation for later studies of the authoritarian personality, was *Studien über Auktorität und Familie*. Among other contributions, this study consisted of a few influential theoretical essays by Horkheimer and Fromm.

While Horkheimer promoted the idea that the position of the family and the father in society had been weakened and replaced by other agents of socialization – primarily the mass media – Fromm discussed different personality types and how they might underlie a totalitarian society. He became caught up in the sadomasochistic character. This personality type included a combination of attributes such as submission to authority, tendencies towards feelings of superiority and a contempt for human weakness. According to Fromm, the only way to counteract developments towards a totalitarian society was to promote a personality development directed towards mature heterosexuality and a strong ego; thus, a personality that

has successfully progressed through Freud's various stages of development, and, in other words, 'solved' its Oedipus complex. In spite of the fact that members of the Frankfurt school became more and more critical of Fromm's normative view of personality, his thoughts would shape further studies of the authoritarian personality.

The Authoritarian Personality (Adorno *et al.*) was published in 1950 in the series *Studies in Prejudice*. The purpose of this series of studies, which was financed by the Jewish Committee, was to investigate anti-Semitic and prejudicial attitudes among various social groups in post-war America. In the study just mentioned, a number of different research methods were used to analyse how people with varying social backgrounds relate to different types of minority groups. Theoretical speculations and empirical results are combined in this text of about 1000 pages. In the book's preface, Max Horkheimer writes as follows:

> This is a book about social discrimination. But its purpose is not simply to add a few more empirical findings to an already extensive body of information. The central theme of the work is a relatively new concept – the rise of an 'anthropological' species we call the authoritarian type of man. In contrast to the bigot of the older style he seems to combine the ideas and skills which are typical of a highly industrialized society with irrational and anti-rationalist beliefs. He is at the same time enlightened and superstitious, proud to be an individualist and in constant fear of not being like all the others, jealous of his independence and inclined to submit blindly to power and authority.
>
> (Adorno *et al.* 1950: ix)

The focus of this study is the *potential* Fascist individual. The basic assumption is that the individual's political, economic and social convictions form a coherent psychological pattern. This pattern, in turn, is based on a specific mentality that is a manifestation of more profound psychological character traits. From a mixture of fragments of psychoanalytic theory and speculations from culture theory, a scale was constructed for the purpose of measuring an individual's potential to become a Fascist. Now quite famous, this scale came to be called the F-scale.

The construction of the F-scale was based on earlier theoretical work and was related to the other measurement techniques used in *The Authoritarian Personality*. The scale was intended to capture a person who was rigid, masochistic, aggressive, reproachful, intense, superstitious, cynical, projecting, paranoid and so on. The personality traits corresponded well with Fromm's description of the sadomasochistic character. However, it is not readily apparent from Adorno's text how the F-scale was tied to earlier attempts to study the same type of phenomenon. Even though the three components that were used in the study – that is, the increasingly means-end, rational social order, the weakened family and the psychoanalytical

discussion of the Oedipus complex – were not explicitly related to one another, the F-scale and the consideration of the authoritarian personality itself were beneficial. Rather than capturing single personality traits, the researchers succeeded in identifying a number of social psychological mechanisms that had a clear place in discussions of Fascism and contempt for minorities.

In *The Authoritarian Personality*, many people are introduced, and we are allowed to see in detail their reasoning on the issue of minorities. We are helped to understand how cognitive attitudes originate from more profound personality traits; how the fear of strangers affects the individual's ability to draw conclusions and think logically. When pressed or threatened, the potential Fascist expresses his or her xenophobic opinions much more clearly. The paranoid and psychotic complex of concepts dominating the deepest psychological levels of this person's mind are activated, the result being that, through mechanisms of projection, various social and ethnic groups are picked out as scapegoats. By not contenting himself with only the obvious content in the interview material – which, in many cases, contained great scepticism about strangers, without being openly hostile in nature – the author of this study succeeded in showing how dangerous this potential Fascism really is. One of the cognitive attitudes that Adorno dissects in his theoretical essays is the so-called 'two kinds idea'. This idea is based on people's differentiation between, for example, good Jews and bad Jews. This type of thinking is illustrated in the following excerpt from an interview with a woman:

> The Negroes are getting so arrogant now, they come to the employment office and say they don't like this kind of job and that kind of job. However, there are some who are employed at the employment office and they are very nice and intelligent. There are nice ones and bad ones among us. The Negroes who have always lived in Oakland are all right; they don't know what to do with all those who are coming in from the South either. They all carries knives; if you do something they don't like, they will get even with you, they will slice you up.
>
> (Adorno *et al.* 1950: 627)

According to Adorno, this polarized and paranoid type of thinking originates in an almost psychotic approach to reality and in a poorly solved Oedipus complex. That which is foreign or strange is experienced as unpleasant and threatening. By projecting his or her own unsolved aggression and other feelings about strangers, the individual is able to maintain a fragile inner balance. If an individual such as this is exposed to levels of external threat that are too high, there is a risk that his or her inner chaos will not only be projected on to other people, but even lead to hostile and destructive behaviour. In this way, the potential Fascist becomes active, acting out his or her inner psychotic fantasies. Adorno and his colleagues

never found a solution to this problem – a problem that we still tackle today.

Self-reflexivity and open relationships

Anthony Giddens' study *The Transformation of Intimacy* is based on analyses of self-help and other relevant literature. Giddens' aim is to provide a background to, and frame questions about, contemporary Western love relationships. His point of departure is a discussion of the romantic love complex. Through this, he leads us to an examination of the growth of what he calls *pure relations*. This type of relationship must be understood against the backdrop of the radical changes that have taken place in late-modern day-to-day life and changes in how people create their own identities. Although Giddens' study is about transformations in the sphere of intimacy, even more specific questions focus on sexuality, states of dependency and, of course, the question of equality.

The main argument in Giddens' book is that the women's movement was responsible for the drastic changes observed in intimate relationships. The romantic love complex was primarily a feminine *Gestalt*. Even though this view of love relationships has mostly been understood as a part of the subordination to which women have been subjected, Giddens thinks that there is an explosiveness in this type of love that facilitates the dissolution of the super- and subordination that have long characterized the relationship between men and women. Although the consumption of love stories has been considered a manifestation of female passivity, it is possible that the fantasy worlds and desires to transform everyday life that are cultivated in these stories can contribute to changes in how intimate relationships are viewed. The individual is always central in romantic love, constantly asking herself: 'Who am I?', 'What do I want in life?', 'Who do I want to live with?', 'What is happiness?' and so on. These questions lead her straight into the type of relationship termed by Giddens as the pure relation.

Just as a given social form is transformed into another – without dissolving completely – romantic love is successively converted into the late-modern love relationship. Giddens describes this relationship as follows:

> A pure relationship has nothing to do with sexual purity, and is a limiting concept rather than only a descriptive one. It refers to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it.
>
> (Giddens 1992: 58)

The growth of the late-modern love relationship does not imply the end of love, but instead the creation of new conditions for love. It is no longer a question of finding a specific person, but developing the specific relationship.

This love relationship is based on mutual respect, open discussions about the nature of the relationship, equality and an ability to approach and discuss questions concerning feelings and relations. Achieving this requires a restructuring of the balance of power between the sexes.

However, there is another side to all this. While constituting the prerequisite for the growth of a new sphere of intimacy, this institutional reflexivity also has consequences for people's need for, and lack of, a fundamental feeling of security in their lives. Institutional reflexivity is a result of more general changes in modernity. The growth of expert systems, the increased amount of knowledge on everything from sexuality to society's energy consumption, and the acceleration of the circulation of this knowledge, results in a situation in which people develop a reflexive attitude towards their life projects and identities. The outcome of this is a constant questioning of 'truths' and a relativizing of the concept of knowledge. Thus, this development is even a threat to people's basic need for security. Reflexivity and the search for an identity can often lead to different types of dependency.

Dependency can, of course, be expressed in various ways: the alcoholic, the sexual abuser, the work addict and so on. Although manifested differently, these are all expressions of an attempt to escape the reflexive identity project. Having a dependency implies giving up the chance to choose and the ability to influence one's own life. In a society in which choosing a life plan and lifestyle is not only possible, but central, dependency constitutes a regressive behaviour that indicates a need to confine life to certain patterns; a need that can easily turn into a destructive abuse of drugs, relationships and experiences. When routines no longer give security, but instead become an unhealthy and destructive pattern of living, the individual has given up the opportunities offered by the reflexive identity project.

Giddens' aim is to analyse the possibilities as well as the limitations of the reflexive identity project, with a special focus on the transformations of intimacy. The origins of this project are in the more general changes in modernity that have been discussed by theoreticians such as Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck and others. The individual who appears is caught between the power of traditions and habit, on the one hand, and the opportunities to elaborate various lifestyles and to choose a specific way in which to mould the life project, on the other. Thus, the individual must constantly battle with the ambivalence and irresolution that this implies.

The late-modern love relationship makes possible the growth of democratic relations, transformed gender identities and mutual respect, but also creates insecurity and leads to endeavours to re-establish traditions and stability in life. In discussing this change in the sphere of intimacy, we naturally enter into new discussions about several other societal and cultural changes and their consequences for the individual.

Gestalt and background

What unites the three studies briefly described above is their commitment to questions that concern the individual's life project and dreams. The authors attempt to frame questions about how the individual relates to changes in society. Although stressing different aspects of the interaction process, they do not reduce phenomena to pure sociology or psychology; instead, they try to create an understanding of the complex processes being studied.

It is obvious that these works are the products of different historical points in time. Wirth's study of the ghetto gives us a glimpse of a specific city environment in Chicago at the beginning of the 1900s. The strength of this study is its almost literary descriptions of people's fates and milieux, as well as its analyses of alienation and integration. What is lacking are elaborated theoretical discussions and concepts, but, in spite of this, we are provided with a good picture of the identity-creating mechanisms that were recreated in the framework of the ghetto.

In the study on the authoritarian personality, we gain some insight into the social psychological dynamics that contribute to the reproduction of a potential Fascism. The F-scale is not only a measurement tool, but also a map of the various mechanisms at work in the creation of fear of strangers and contempt for 'the other'. The strength of this study lies in its discussions of these mechanisms and in the connection between psychoanalytic theory and analyses of people's attitudes towards foreigners. The study constitutes an ambitious attempt to interrelate three different levels of analysis: the intrapsychological, the attitudinal and the societal. Although the type of Freudo-Marxism that inspired studies of the authoritarian personality has received a great deal of criticism, this way of seeing things has also affected development in social psychology and created interest in the contribution psychoanalytic theory has made to social scientific studies.

Giddens' study of the transformations of intimacy relates the contemporary discussion on reflexivity to changes in the love relationship and the increased divorce rate in the West. By experimenting with a number of concepts, for example, pure relations, reflexivity, dependency and anti-dependency, Giddens succeeds in developing a social psychological analysis of the transformations of intimacy. Many of his concepts build a bridge between the societal and psychological level. In order to understand Giddens' analysis of intimacy, we must first create for ourselves a good picture of the general societal changes that have led to increased reflexivity and to a transformation of the relations between the sexes. When we have done this, the discussion on 'pure relations' is given real meaning.

Simple recipes for how to do a social psychological analysis do not exist. The number of studies I would unconditionally describe as excellent or classic works in social psychology is rather small. In this category I would place, among others, Nels Anderson's *The Hobo* ([1923] 1967) and some of the

early Chicago studies, William F. Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1981), Erving Goffman's *Asylums* (1961), Ulf Hannerz's *Soulside* (1969) and Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour* (1977). Although the list could be longer, the number of studies of this calibre is still rather limited, considering the enormous number of social scientific works published every year. How can we explain this? The answer would seem to be simply that social psychology is hard to do. In some sense, social psychology involves developing what is so appropriately called an overall perspective. But what is meant by this?

Social psychology as a science and an art

The social psychology discussed in this book has gradually become an integrated part of sociology. But it is definitely not the case that all sociology is characterized by the perspective we call social psychology. If we are to develop this perspective, we must build on the tradition founded in Chicago and Frankfurt at the beginning of this century. What can we learn from this early development and how should we continue today?

A social psychological study must be marked by a great sensitivity for the whole. It involves painting a social and cultural landscape, and forming insights into the various social courses of events taking place in a specific location and during a special historical period. This demands a great deal of creativity. Thus, the best social psychological studies also have certain literary qualities. Their authors succeed in combining critical discussions and reflections on various concepts with the ability to give the reader insight into, and a feeling for, what has been studied. Such studies provide us with the tools to better understand and change the social reality in which we find ourselves.

Getting a handle on a complex social environment and forming an understanding of the processes at work there require theoretical flexibility. Researchers must be ready to use concepts from different scientific disciplines, to experiment with perspectives and analyses and to develop new ideas. The development of a critical approach to society is made possible by studying in detail how the social construction of various phenomena takes place. Garfinkel's ethnomethodological experiments have taught us how fragile and changeable social reality is and, at the same time, how tremendously strong people's resistance to change is. Social psychology takes place in the expanse between the stable and the changeable. The interest is not in describing social reality, but in developing a critical approach to it and in offering new knowledge.

Contemporary social psychology must be able to contribute to the development of a critical perspective on society and the individual. Thus, social psychology must be constantly updated in terms of analyses and concepts if it is to participate in contemporary analyses and contribute the

specific knowledge of the relation between the individual and society that is its speciality. In such a social psychology, an empathetic approach is taken to the people studied, while the aim is also to expose oppression and injustice, and to dissect the conditions and structure of power. Thus, we have returned to the ambitions expressed at the beginning of the last century by the researchers in Chicago – ambitions we, at least in part, ought to hold on to as we have now entered into a new century.

In the first part of the book, I will present and critically deal with a number of important authors and traditions in social psychology. Many of the concepts and thoughts discussed in this part will also be used in Part II, where I will even discuss a few contemporary theoretical perspectives. Part II is intended to inspire the reader and show how social psychological thinking can be used to frame questions about, and analyse, various aspects of late-modern culture.

Selecting and presenting social psychological theories can, of course, be done in many different ways. It is often difficult to make distinctions, and we could, in principle, include all theories in which questions about the relationship between individual and society are framed. I have chosen to follow the development of the type of social psychology that was elaborated by authors such as Simmel and Goffman, and that is being further developed today by Giddens, Beck and other sociologists.

By isolating this variant of social psychological tradition, I am simultaneously disregarding a number of other theoretical approaches. I compensate for this, in part, by dealing more freely with various types of theory in the second part of the book. Naturally, this book should not be read as though it contained the only true version of today's social psychology. On the other hand, I think that the type of social psychology presented here is useful as a rough frame of reference for those engaged in empirical studies.

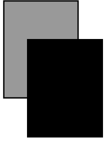
Simmel's attempt to formulate a critical social psychology at the beginning of the twentieth century is my point of departure. The development in twentieth-century Germany is then tied to the growth of the Chicago school. Both Simmel and the Chicago sociologists were fascinated by the changes taking place in the expanding big city milieu. They made shrewd observations of the transformations in people's living conditions in modern society. The analyses of big city life then bring us to Walter Benjamin and the influence of psychoanalytic theories on social psychology. I deal with Benjamin, Marcuse and Elias, among others. Later, we become acquainted with Goffman's analyses of the trivialities of everyday life. And finally, I discuss the possible death of social psychology and its incorporation into sociology. This becomes quite clear when we look at theoreticians such as Giddens, Bauman and Beck, who do not consider themselves to be social psychologists, but who, in spite of this, have much in common with the authors mentioned previously.

After an introduction to this particular mainstream social psychology,

based within sociology, the reader should have good ground to stand on when later venturing into the broader spectrum of social psychologies. Before beginning to improvise, one should learn certain basics. Only then is it possible to work through and expand on those themes that constitute the focus of social psychology.

Notes

1 Translated by K.W. (Karen Williams).
2 Translated by K.W.
3 William McDougal (1908) and Edward Alsworth Ross (1908), respectively.
4 In this context we can mention *The Hobo*, by Nels Anderson (1923), *The Gang*, by Fredrick Trasher (1927), *The Marginal Man*, by Everett Stonequist (1937) and *The Slum and the Gold Coast*, by Harvey Warren Zorbaugh ([1929] 1978).



Part I Theoretical perspectives

1 Georg Simmel: the psychologist of social life

Objectivity and emotionality

Georg Simmel's work has long lain in the shadow of other sociological classics, but in the 1990s we can talk about a Simmel renaissance. Many of his papers have been published in English and have, thereby, been given greater exposure. At the beginning of the last century, the interpretation of Simmel's work that was influential in the USA emphasized his attempts to define and delimit *social forms*; thus, his attempts to analyse those distinctive features that characterize social institutions, social types and various kinds of social interaction (Simmel 1959). Now, Simmel has been rediscovered, and it is his analyses of modernity that are central. He is praised because early in his work he was able to capture and describe the vague, liquid and constantly changing processes that are often associated with the very meaning of the concept of modernity (Frisby 1981, 1992).

Whereas in his early work, and primarily in *The Philosophy of Money,* Simmel studies the differentiation of society and the process of individualization, much of his later work deals with how individuals, in various ways, manage the objectivization of the culture. Although his attitude towards people's potential to develop their individuality is positive, he simultaneously questions the concept of the individual. With time, he develops a theory of the human being that takes into account 'unconscious factors', irrationality, strong expressions of emotion and the fragmented nature of individuality. His later texts are marked by a great respect for people's private and inner lives, and for people's right to remain unexplained, subtle and secretive.

In order to understand Simmel's later analyses of people's emotional lives and his attempt to save subjectivity from a constantly growing and paralysing culture, we must compare his studies of the symbolic meanings of the money economy with his later analyses of love, shame, discretion, beauty, the face and so forth. It is only after studying the relationship between his two major sociological works – *The Philosophy of Money* and *Sociology* – that we can first begin to understand the cultural and philosophical existentialism he formulated in various texts towards the end of his life.

The Philosophy of Money was completed at the end of the nineteenth century, but published – significantly enough – in 1900. The work is extremely comprehensive, and covers everything from general cultural change to analyses of social characters and specific social problems. Although the title might seem to imply an economic theory, the work deals primarily with cultural change, social relationships and the prerequisites for real individuality. Simmel published his second major sociological work, *Sociology*, in 1908. Here we find analyses of social conflicts, power and poverty, as well as studies of how people, in various contexts, formulate their individual, distinctive characters.[1] In connection with this work, Simmel also published a number of shorter works in which he developed a sociological analysis of emotions.

In comparing these works and studying Simmel's analyses of love, discretion, secrets, lies and human passion, one is overwhelmed by the feeling of being present in, and experiencing, European cultural life during the early 1900s. We can study a discussion on individuality, choices and cultural production that anticipates and is largely similar to the discussion on postmodern culture being carried on today. Simmel contributes to the framing of these questions and shows how complex the question of human freedom and opportunities for self-fulfilment really is.

In order to comment on the consequences of the process of individualization, we must study the relationship between societal and cultural differentiation, on the one hand, and the individual's emotional reactions to these changes, on the other. Simmel stresses the fact that there is a difference between the generally increased occurrence of new lifestyles and possible identities, on the one hand, and the private individual's ability to take advantage of these new cultural conditions, on the other. Thus, cultural development does not automatically lead to greater individual freedom. Simmel also states that the increasing gap between the objective culture and individuals' subjective approach to this culture constitutes a growing problem.

In the following section, I will compare and contrast a number of Simmel's different lines of thought. I will also raise the question of where his analyses of the symbolic meaning of the money economy, social types, ways of reacting emotionally and the tragedy of culture actually lead us, and ask what consequences Simmel's sociology of culture has for contemporary analyses of the culture and the individual.

The money economy and the objective nature of life

It is difficult to read Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money* primarily as a work on economy or the historical development of the money economy. This work is, rather, a study of how social relationships and individuals are affected and transformed in a capitalistic society. Simmel shows how, in the wake of this societal development, a specific way of thinking and certain social types come into being. The money economy is marked by its objective nature – that is, money lacks individuality, peculiarity and character. Simmel writes: 'Money whose peculiarity lies in a lack of peculiarity' (Simmel [1900] 1990: 470). According to Simmel, human relationships tend, in the same way, to become more objective and to lose their specific and unique character:

> Money is not only the absolutely interchangeable object, each quantity of which can be replaced without distinction by any other; it is, so to speak, interchangeability personified.
>
> (Simmel [1900] 1990: 24)

The money economy has a number of paradoxical consequences for social relationships. On the one hand, people become interchangeable, alienated and develop ways of approaching one another that are impersonal. On the other hand, intimacy, freedom of choice and the possibility to satisfy various needs are facilitated. The real and symbolic power of money lies in its ability to liberate the individual from traditions and ties. Although Simmel highlights this aspect of freedom, he is also careful to point out and criticize the gradual objectivization of human relationships that is a consequence of the expansion of the capitalistic economy.[2]

The value of money, for some people, is supreme. Simmel's description of greed and extravagance captures the superficiality of this cult of money. Greedy people enjoy owning money. They collect and accumulate it without using it. Extravagant people, however, enjoy the very act of consumption – the moment when money changes hands. Thus, we have two social types representing two very different approaches to money. But, at the same time, these ideal types constitute the foundation of the capitalistic economy: accumulation of capital and consumption.

When these two forms of money worship are manifested in real, individual destinies, they take on a tragic character. He who is greedy can never enjoy life and things, but only the saving of money itself; this leads to material petrification. He who is extravagant lives only to experience the kick of consumption, but must continue the hunt for more of the same.

The money economy is the driving force behind a sweeping process of rationalization that contributes to the emergence of an objective culture: a culture to which the individual finds it more and more difficult to assimilate and develop a relationship. Thus, the increasing differentiation in society,

which is a consequence of these processes, does not automatically lead to greater freedom in reality. Even if, for example, fashion is characterized by differentiation and constant change, this does not mean that the individual's autonomy is promoted, and it definitely does not mean that we can talk about individuality or *authenticity.*[3] The differentiation into different lifestyles and expressions of style is a consequence of changes in what Simmel terms the objective culture. And, at the same time, the growth of this culture also constitutes a threat to the search for authenticity.

One consequence of the growth of the abstract culture and of the intellectualization of culture observed by Simmel is an increased distance between family members and between people in general. But this increased distance corresponds, in turn, to an increased closeness between people who earlier found themselves far apart. The money economy leads to decreased spatial and psychological distance between people, while it also creates a distance in the relationships between people. In other words, the relation between the local and the global has been drastically transformed during modernity.

More and more, human relationships are marked by the paradoxes and duality that characterize the capitalistic economy. We have both freedom and compulsion, distance and closeness, and a constant yearning to satisfy excessive desires. These paradoxes become most evident in big cities, where we find many different social relationships and mixtures of cultural styles.

The joys and sorrows of big city life

The Philosophy of Money is a story about modern society, but also about the big city and its people. To be sure, Simmel wrote his famous essay on the big cities and intellectual life in 1903, but his principal interpretation of big city life could already be found in his book from 1900. Even if *The Philosophy of Money* is largely a philosophical discourse on the symbolic meanings of the money economy, Simmel constantly returns to the effects of this economy on human relationships.

We encounter no tangible people in Simmel's texts, but rather temporarily embodied approaches to modernity. The social types we meet – the pauper, the adventurer, the stranger, the prostitute, the miser, the spendthrift and others – are expressions of both the advantages and disadvantages of modernity. Although Simmel's view of mankind's future becomes increasingly darker, I think we can learn to identify the ambivalences, paradoxes and nuances in his texts, and use them to highlight the complexity that characterized big cities in the early 1900s.

Simmel's stranger, who received his final *Gestalt* in *Sociology*, is already in place in Berlin in 1900. This figure is well suited to the impersonal, transitory and objective form of social relationships that is cultivated in the

capitalistic money economy. The stranger has neither historical roots in the environment nor in the social relationships he is temporarily affected by, and he can, thus, develop a relatively objective approach to social reality. By developing a dissociated and rational approach to financial transactions and to people, the stranger embodies the principles that drive the modern capitalistic economy forward – an economy that is no longer about gifts and returned favours or about personal relationships, but instead about objective distance and means-end rationality.[4] Thus, Simmel's description of the stranger also constitutes an attempt to capture an essential dynamic in the capitalistic society:

> The significance of the stranger for the nature of money seems to me to be epitomized in miniature by the advice I once overheard: never have any financial dealings with two kinds of people – friends and enemies. In the first case, the indifferent objectivity of money transactions is in insurmountable conflict with the personal character of the relationship; in the other, the same condition provides a wide scope for hostile intentions which corresponds to the fact that our forms of law in a money economy are never precise enough to rule out wilful malice with certainty. The desirable party for financial transactions – in which, as it has been said quite correctly, business is business – is the person completely indifferent to us, engaged neither for us nor against us.
>
> (Simmel [1900] 1990: 227)

The stranger has no emotional ties to the people he does business with. This makes doing business easier. The stranger is able to profit by the principles that reign in the capitalistic economy.

In contrast to the stranger, the prostituted woman represents a victim of a society in which everything is objectivized and transformed into goods that can be bought and sold on a market. As opposed to a gift, which requires a counter-reaction and which is based on a human relationship, money is strictly objective in nature. That which can be bought is also reduced to being a piece of merchandise and a means. The objective character of money is well suited to a human economy that is focused on consumption of experiences and, in the worst case, also of people. By becoming a piece of merchandise, the prostitute is degraded and loses her human dignity. However, it is not only the prostitute who is negatively affected by this financial transaction, but also the client.

> Of all human relationships, prostitution is perhaps the most striking instance of mutual degradation to a mere means, and this may be the strongest and most fundamental factor that places prostitution in such a close historical relationship to the money economy, the economy of 'means' in the strictest sense.
>
> (Simmel [1900] 1990: 377)

The capitalistic economy leads to an upheaval of intimate relationships and of people's internal psychological approach to the surrounding world. Simmel describes two personal strategies that are increasingly common and that can be used to deal with the changes in the culture. The *cynic's* reaction to the tendency towards the levelling of values is perverse curiosity. The cynic makes sweeping generalizations over everyone and everything, and enjoys this reduction of feelings, values and experiences.

Another way to approach the same societal tendencies is to develop a *blasé attitude*. This attitude is a reaction to the increasing amount of stimuli and experiences offered by society. The constant search for a 'kick' and various kinds of experience results in recurrent disappointments. When the effect of the latest experience has dissipated, a feeling of emptiness takes its place. Thus, the bombardment of stimuli and the enormous assortment of experiences cause people to withdraw into themselves and develop an attitude of indifference towards life. The more people try to cure their indifference by finding new experiences and kicks, the faster this blasé attitude develops.

The money economy pulls all human relationships into its symbolic orbit. It colours everything from business transactions to intimate love relationship. The result of this economy is the growth of new forms of human relationship. These relationships still constitute expressions of trust, love, intimacy, joy and other feelings. But in a society that is becoming more and more abstract in character and in which social relationships are increasingly controlled through the money economy, the basic conditions for social relationships are in a state of change. These changes can lead to increased individual freedom, but also to petrified human relationships in which joy and desire have turned into a blasé or cynical and indifferent attitude towards life.

This possible freedom, however, must also be realized in some form of identity project. By this, Simmel means that an inner homelessness has developed. People lack a solid core, and tend to place more and more of their identity in external objects – in the world of things. The project of modern man would seem to be increasingly paradoxical. The remedies people seek for their rootlessness and cultural confusion do not lead to improvement, but instead intensify their feelings of fragmentation.

In 1911, Simmel published an essay entitled 'The Adventurer' (Simmel 1971). According to the reasoning found in *The Philosophy of Money*, this social type could be considered to be the most extreme consequence of the money economy. The adventurer lives exclusively in the present, cut off from the past as well as the future. He or she exists in a dream world and accepts this world's fluid and variable features. The adventurer is the standard-bearer of modernism. He or she does not hesitate to break all ties and devotes himself or herself to the unconditional exploration of life. Life's unpredictability and randomness feed the adventurer's fantasies and dreams of a better life.

Adventurers leave behind them all material ties and set off on a hazardous journey into the internal and external world. To the onlooker, their attitude towards life seems to include a touch of insanity, but taking chances and risks is an important part of their lifestyle. While adventurers can take advantage of the opportunities offered by a changeable culture, they also expose themselves to constant risks. They are always prepared to seize the moment, and are, in this way, able to adapt themselves to cultural changes. At the same time, however, they lack an inner psychological stability and are dependent on constant experiences.

The development of social types such as the miser, the spendthrift, the pauper, the prostitute, the stranger and the adventurer constitutes the most distinct manifestation of the capitalistic economy's influence on human interaction. Although Simmel wants to stress the negative effects of this social change, he is also careful to point out that it is possible for people to avoid and protect themselves from the very worst consequences of capitalism. People's ability to keep things secret, to be discreet and to never completely reveal who they are – *the strategy of constant escape* – is the most marked feature of the emotionology of modernity.

The emotionology of modernity

In his early papers and major work on the philosophy of the money economy, Simmel dedicated himself to outlining the overall changes in modernity. Later, however, in his sociological papers, Simmel focused on the individual and the sphere of intimacy. He was interested in the contradictory relation between society and individuals – between the whole and its parts. While the whole has a tendency to consist of its parts, it is the specific organization of the parts that determines the overall impression. Take, for example, the face:

> The face is the most remarkable aesthetic synthesis of the formal principles of symmetry and of individuality. As a whole, it realizes individualization; but it does so in the form of symmetry, which controls the relations among the parts.[5]
>
> (Simmel 1959: 279ff)

Simmel, in a later essay on the nature of philosophy, stresses even more strongly the contradiction between the parts and the whole[6] (Simmel 1959). This emphasis on the contradiction between the general and the individual became increasingly important to Simmel. Many people are still tackling these questions today, which is why we will take a closer look at the way in which Simmel conceptualizes this culture conflict.

Humans are extremely social beings. They are nourished by social life. However, this sociability can also lose its connection to everyday life and be

transformed into a pure and lifeless social form. Simmel writes: 'If sociability entirely cuts its ties with the reality of life out of which it makes its own fabric (of however different a style), it ceases to be a play and becomes a desultory playing-around with empty forms, a lifeless schematism which is even proud of its lifelessness' (Simmel 1950: 56).

The cultural development that Simmel describes in his later papers constitutes a clear threat to this sociability. People must, therefore, develop a number of strategies in order to protect themselves from the overabundance of impressions and the objectivization of the culture that threaten individual creativity. In the big city, the individual develops a cynical and blasé attitude towards others and towards life in general. In order to protect himself from all these impressions and from the bombardment of stimuli and visual shocks that are produced in the big city, modern man tends to retreat to the sphere of intimacy. This retreat from 'modernity' is also one of modernity's central aspects. People are forced to develop strategies in order to maintain their self-esteem and identity. The purpose of these strategies is to make people more obscure. One way to deal with an external threat is to keep things secret:

> The secret puts a barrier between men but, at the same time, it creates the tempting challenge to break through it by gossip or confession – and this challenge accompanies its psychology like a constant overtone. The sociological significance of the secret, therefore, has its practical extent, its mode of realization, only in the individual's capacity or inclination to keep it to himself, in his resistance or weakness in the face of tempting betrayal.[7]
>
> (Simmel 1950: 334)

The secret constitutes a necessary psychological defence in a world that threatens to destroy individuality. By setting up a kind of barrier against the surrounding world – attempting to keep secrets and keeping unique experiences out of view – the individual can counteract the hypostasis that threatens all life.

The individual, by refusing to reveal his or her secrets, can protect his or her inner emotional life from being exploited by the subjectivity that is promoted in the capitalistic economy. In an essay on discretion, Simmel writes that if we take away the possibility for people to remain mysterious and secretive, we also take away their human dignity (Simmel 1950). In order to preserve their human dignity and their ability to attract others, people must develop the art of maintaining their integrity. According to Simmel, many love relationships have dissolved because the individuals have become much too visible for one another. In a culture that threatens to transform the sphere of intimacy and cultural creativity into lifeless social forms – devoid of all humanity – it is, as a matter of course, necessary to develop the ability to remain obscure and to defend the sphere of privacy at all costs.

Simmel's version of the emotionology of modernity deals largely with how

individuals can preserve the right to formulate their own identity and how the abstract culture can be prevented from enveloping all forms of social interaction and intimate relations in an increasingly widespread alienation. By focusing on the unpredictable, obscure and unattainable, Simmel's goal is to show how we can safeguard individuality and the peculiarity that distinguishes humans. One of humankind's central driving forces is the constant longing to arrive at some kind of truth about life and about other people, but this search is a fatal one. We can never know another person completely, and it is precisely this impossibility that drives people to continue their search and that upholds their desire for the tacit. Love for another person is awakened and maintained by fascination with the prospect of the unknown and inaccessible. If anticipation and suspense cease to exist, the love relationship is also threatened.

In Simmel's later works, the question of the relation between individual and culture is transformed into a more philosophical discussion of the general and the specific in life. Simmel was to grapple with this complex of problems until his death in 1918.

Culture and existence

Simmel, in his later papers, first deals with objective versus subjective culture, and later deals with discussions of life versus form. Although these dualistic notions might seem similar, there are crucial differences between them (Nedelmann 1991).

The conflict between the objective and the subjective culture is about the difficulties people have with using the abstract culture and basing their lives on it. According to Simmel, we are surrounded by thousands of superfluous things that we are unable to free ourselves from. A cultural logic develops, and this logic has a life of its own. The relationship between the individual and the culture ceases to function, and this creates an unfathomable gap between subjective and objective culture. People withdraw in order to defend the last vestiges of their individuality, while the culture is objectivized and loses its aura (Simmel [1911] 1981).

When Simmel makes the transition to talking about life and form, his interest shifts from social life to a philosophical discussion of the conditions of life. What he calls life is a driving force that – like Freud's instinctual drives – is the basis for all human existence. Life and form are constantly involved in a dialectic interplay, but they are also one another's enemies. On the one hand, we have life; it flows and cannot be controlled; it is unpredictable and opposes all attempts to create structure and order. On the other hand, however, all types of human existence presuppose a form and structure. This social form threatens to kill life. But life always finds a way out. And so on, and so forth (Simmel 1971).

Although Simmel's linguistic usage is different towards the end of his life, he still constantly refers back to the same fundamental and irreconcilable conflict between some type of subjectivity or inner driving force, on the one hand, and the abstract culture or social forms, on the other. This conflict tends to create an increasingly wider gap between the individual and the culture:

> Life wishes here to obtain something which it cannot reach. It desires to transcend all forms and to appear in its naked immediacy. Yet the processes of thinking, wishing, and forming can only substitute one form for another. They can never replace the form as such by life which as such transcends the form. All these attacks against the forms of our culture, which align against them the forces of life 'in itself', embody the deepest internal contradictions of the spirit. Although this chronic conflict between form and life has become acute in many historical epochs, none but ours has revealed it so clearly as its basic theme.
>
> (Simmel 1971: 393)

Simmel wrote these lines during his last year of life. He expresses a pessimism about culture that is, in many ways, similar to the pessimism that Freud formulated in his book *Civilization and its Discontents* ([1930] 1986). Simmel had just lived through the First World War when he formulated his thoughts about life and form. Freud wrote his book on the struggle between life and death instincts during a troubled time in which the spectre of Fascism would soon begin its devastation of Europe. The struggle between life and death was intensified, and the great existential questions were brought to a head. The question is whether the pessimism about culture that thinkers such as Freud and Simmel stood for has anything to contribute to today's discussions.

A cul-de-sac of culture pessimism?

In both of Simmel's main works, we find interesting attempts to develop a social psychology for modern society. In his exciting essays and fragments of text on the stranger, the adventurer, the face, greed, extravagance, discretion, secrets and lies and so on, Simmel succeeds in capturing the subjective life of the individual and relating it to central changes in the culture. Now and then, Simmel provides us with brilliant analyses of the relation between psychological processes, social interaction and culture. His thoughts on nervous disorders typical of the period, big city life and the money economy's transformations are woven together so as to form an exciting social psychological fabric. The theory of the symbolic consequences of the money economy for human relationships is telling, and more specific reaction patterns and actions are made comprehensible by such an analysis.

The question is, however, whether or not this intellectual model of the tragedy of culture, which becomes clearer and clearer in Simmel's papers, leads us into a theoretical cul-de-sac. If we follow his intellectual development and try to understand how he relates to people and the culture, we become increasingly disappointed with his tendency to resort to stereotypes. Simmel's descriptions of modern culture become more and more clichéd, and his attempts to save individuality result in a worship of escapism, obscurity and the absolutely private life. It is difficult to completely accept Simmel's picture of an increasingly abstract and unapproachable culture and of an individual who – trying to save his or her individuality at all costs – retreats into the private world.

Why, then, do Simmel's social psychological analyses of modernity constitute such a mixture of brilliant observations and gross and simplistic generalizations? Philosophical concepts such as subjective and objective culture, life and form are made lifeless, and the use of these concepts leads to a view of social life that is quite lacking in variation and subtlety.

Analyses of the money economy's symbolic meanings play a central role in Simmel's thinking. Although the method of highlighting a specific driving force and systematically showing how it affects all social life is efficient, there is a risk that the analyses will become self-perpetuating, that is that everything is explained according to a supreme principle. Because of its symbolic status, the money economy influences everything from love relationships to consumption of goods. Thus, while this analysis gives us insights into how the capitalistic economy affects human relationships, nuances regarding power relations, politics, laws and collective action, for example, are left out. We run the great risk of exaggerating the symbolic influence that economic factors might have on social life. There are, obviously, other factors that shape the culture.

The question is, how fruitful is it to use analogies to analyse the relation between the money economy and human relationships? Such an approach presupposes a rather static relation between both of these levels of analysis. The advantage of using this type of reasoning is that it makes a discussion of the relation between greatly differing social processes possible. There are, however, also disadvantages. It is, for example, difficult to discern human relationships that are not directly affected by the capitalistic economy. This line of reasoning also tends to take on a much too abstract character. We miss the subtleties and diversity in social life.

It could be said that Simmel's social psychology has been fruitful primarily in terms of his analyses of social types and of the various strategies people develop to deal with the overflow of impressions and experiences to which they are exposed in the big city. Even if we do not accept the conclusions Simmel draws from his theoretical studies of culture, certain of his analytical devices are useful. I will conclude by presenting a few of the lines of thought that are still relevant to analyses of contemporary life.

Simmel distinguishes between *individualization* and *individuality*. Even if a greater diversity of cultural expressions and a differentiation of various lifestyles are developing in society, this development does not imply that private individuals are enriched and made more individual. If the distance between lifestyles and styles at the cultural level and the individual's activities becomes too great, both the culture and the individual are impoverished. Thus, individuals develop in their meeting with the culture. However, during periods in which such a genuine meeting is made difficult, individual development does not occur. Simmel considered his contemporary culture to represent such a period. The problem with Simmel's analysis is that he tends to objectivize both the culture and the individual, and both levels of analysis lack modulation. The culture is presented as being overly homogeneous, and the individual as totally fragmented and nearly dissolved. The dualistic notion on which these analyses are founded is problematic, in that it tends to lead us into a social psychological cul-de-sac, where culture and individual become separate categories and are no longer components in an analysis of social interaction.

The analysis of the emotionology of modernity that Simmel develops constitutes a good starting point for an exploration of how people react to various societal and cultural transformations. Whereas Simmel's focus is primarily on the defensive aspects of this emotionology – withdrawal into the private sphere and the will to preserve an aura around the personality – it is important to take this a step further and discuss the more offensive strategies and reactions belonging to the same emotionology. When Simmel analyses the social psychology of conflict, he certainly touches on these aspects – for example, when he highlights the positive and uniting function of aggression in human relationships. At the same time, however, he leaves out many of the other expressions of emotion that are used to shape the culture.

Simmel introduces the idea of the city as a *mental and symbolic space*. It is the very experience of the city itself that is central to many of Simmel's analyses. An important aspect of the city culture is the bombardment of stimuli and impressions experienced there. Lacking from Simmel's view of the city, however, are more specific analyses of the symbolic meanings associated with different areas and material objects. The strength of Simmel's work on the city lies in his analyses of the social relationships and social types that arise in this big city culture – a culture so strongly marked by the money economy.

By introducing colourful and dynamic *social types* such as the stranger, the adventurer and the miser, Simmel succeeds in saying something essential about modernity. These social types not only constitute individual manifestations, but they have even more general implications. The stranger's objective character, the adventurer's dream-like existence and the miser's money worship are all expressions of modernity. Through these analyses, Simmel is able to capture the connection between cultural change and the

level of the actor, without reducing one level to the other. Although many of Simmel's concepts are too strongly tied to classic philosophical discourse – the limitations of which have been shown in many ways – there is still much to be derived from his analyses of the dynamics that characterize social interaction. His emphasis on paradoxes, oppositions and change has much to offer contemporary social psychology. The strength of his analyses lies in his attempts to formulate concepts that reconcile the relation between the cultural and individual levels of analysis. In this way, Simmel is sometimes able to capture essential aspects of modernity. At the same time, however, he sometimes pushes his analogies so far that they tend to turn into clichés and stereotypes. Although Simmel has commonly been criticized for his unsystematic studies of various phenomena and his lack of logic, I would like to claim just the opposite, that is, that he tends to push his systematics too far and is much too consistent in his attempts to hit the nail – of his contemporary culture and its problems – on the head.

Digression: Simmel and the Chicago school

Intellectual distance and creative proximity

Georg Simmel never travelled to Chicago, and for this reason we will never know what he would have thought about the city. However, several Chicago sociologists did go to Germany to participate in Simmel's seminars. Robert E. Park, who was one of the most influential sociologists in Chicago at the time, attended Simmel's seminars from 1899 to 1903 (Bulmer 1984). As a result of these visits, many of Simmel's articles were translated into English and published in *The American Journal of Sociology*. Thus, Simmel had a certain influence on the early intellectual development within the Chicago school. It is difficult to say, however, how great this influence was. Although many of the classic studies on Chicago's urban environment seem to have been influenced by Simmel's thinking, this is not always made clear in references to the literature. Without making any great claims about having reconstructed the relation between Simmel's ideas and the sociology that developed in Chicago, I will discuss a few similarities and differences between these two 'traditions'.

At the beginning of the 1900s, Chicago was experiencing steady growth and was a city with a very mixed population, both in terms of social class and ethnicity. Half of the city's 1.7 million residents were foreign-born. Lincoln Steffens (an American journalist) described the city as: '. . . first in violence, deepest in dirt; loud, lawless, unlovely, ill-smelling, new; an overgrown gawk of a village, the teeming tough among cities' (Bulmer 1984: 14). Given this description, we can readily understand why the sociologists in Chicago, led by Robert Park, had decided to regard the city as a large

social laboratory, where one could study 'Life as it is lived'. Why travel to the North Pole or climb Mount Everest in order to find adventure when we have Chicago, argued Park (Lindner 1996: 31).

In the book *The City*, Park and Burgess formulated the foundations for the large-scale research programme on social and cultural life in Chicago that would later result in a number of interesting studies. The book not only included many essential questions about the city and its residents, but the authors also developed a specific theoretical approach. In addition to buildings, institutions and means of communication, they claimed that the city was also a mental space – a 'state of mind'. According to this view, we should approach the city as if it were a living organism, consisting of physical objects and geographical areas as well as people who try to shape their lives within the framework of a specific city environment. Through the study of how various neighbourhoods evolved, were populated, cultivated and changed, a human ecology was developed in Chicago.

Simmel's essay on the big cities and intellectual life had either a direct or an indirect influence on many of the research projects carried out in different areas of Chicago during the 1920s and 1930s. In contrast to Simmel, who was content to observe the city from a distance, the Chicago scientists were out in the city environment acquainting themselves with its neighbourhoods and people. This type of hands-on sociology was, thus, able to flesh out many of Simmel's concepts with more detailed and varied contents. Through these studies, we are even allowed to meet real people, and to study their view of the city.

Whereas Simmel's social types are theoretical constructions, the descriptions of the social types we meet in the Chicago studies, such as *The Hobo* or *The Marginal Man*, are based on people's own stories. Just as Simmel was able to show how, for example, the prostitute, the miser and the pauper developed in a specific time and were expressions of certain cultural and economic changes, the above studies give us a feeling for how these social types are formed by, and form, the culture. The different people we meet in studies such as *The Ghetto*, *The Hobo* and *The Gold Coast and the Slum* provide us with a living illustration of Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s. In these studies, people and milieux are merged together, creating intricate social and cultural networks.

Although Georg Simmel was not always included in the authors' list of references, he seems to have made his mark on Park and colleagues' successful research on big city culture in Chicago. We see Simmel's influence most clearly in notions about the city as a mental as opposed to an exclusively physical environment, in attempts to capture different social types and, lastly, in the use of the stranger as a kind of symbolic *Gestalt* for social change and modernity.

Two studies that provide us with a good illustration of the empirical work carried out in the Chicago school are Nels Anderson's *The Hobo* and Harvey

Zorbaugh's *The Gold Coast and the Slum. The Hobo* was the first study in the series of books produced within the framework of this school of thought, and *The Gold Coast and the Slum* was distinguished by its human ecological perspective on the transformations of the city environment.

The Hobo – the homeless adventurer

In a new edition of *The Hobo* ([1923] 1967), Nels Anderson explains the background to his classic study on homeless men. His story begins in 1882, when his father arrived in the USA, having emigrated from Sweden. Instead of establishing a permanent residence in the new country, Anderson's father travelled and took various temporary jobs. He worked as a farmer, logger, miner and so on. Anderson continued in his father's footsteps and took to the road, having neither a goal nor a direction. After several years of wandering, he finally settled in Chicago, where he began his studies in sociology. His interest in homeless men was shared by Robert Park, and the research project resulted in the now classic portrayal of the social situation for homeless men in Chicago during the 1920s.

In 1917, the number of homeless in Chicago varied between 30,000 and 70,000 individuals, depending on the fluctuations in the job market. For the most part, these men were on their way to a new job somewhere in the country, but when they needed to rest or to look for new work, they returned to the city. They lived in a specific area called *Hobohemia*. This area was completely dominated by men, and here we could find beggars, adventurers, gamblers, drug dealers and petty thieves. All of these men were homeless, but they came from different backgrounds and therefore differed in their ability to manage a life of itinerancy and insecurity. On the street and in the various camps where the homeless found temporary sanctuary, a strong sense of solidarity developed; but lawlessness also existed. One social type who sneaked around in these areas was the petty thief – *the Jack roller*. He robbed men while they were drunk and when they were sleeping. On the occasions when a petty thief was caught, he was in a grave situation and could even be beaten to death.

These men had various reasons for taking to the road in search of happiness. One factor was the instability of the job market, which forced individuals to look for temporary work and contributed to the precarious lifestyle. Many men were also drawn to the road in search of adventure. Anderson described this longing as a *wanderlust*:

> Wanderlust is a longing for a new experience. It is the yearning to see new places, to feel the thrill of new sensations, to encounter new situations, and to know the freedom and the exhilaration of being a stranger. . . . Tramp life is an invitation to a career of varied experiences and adventures. All this is a promise and a challenge. A promise that

> all the wishes that disturb him shall be fulfilled and a challenge to leave the work-a-day world that he is bound to.
>
> (Anderson [1923] 1967: 82)

Anderson makes a distinction between this type of adventurer (*the hobo*), who is a special type of homeless man, and other types such as the tramp, the seasonal worker, the alcoholic and those men who are permanent residents of Hobohemia. In one extract from the book, these types are described as follows: 'The hobo works and wanders, the tramp dreams and wanders and the bum drinks and wanders'.

The homeless men in Chicago were, in other words, a heterogeneous group of people with different fortunes. Although most of these men lived on a day-to-day basis, it was common for them to organize themselves in various ways. A kind of 'public sector for the homeless' developed that, among other things, consisted of union groups, religious movements, intellectual activities and training programmes. The homeless were known for reading the daily newspapers. At that time, there were a number of radical papers directed at the working class, and even a paper called *The Hobo* that dealt with the situation of the homeless more specifically. Thus, a particular culture was created in Hobohemia, which included a large selection of newspapers and magazines, authors, poets and intellectuals.

During the 1920s and 1930s, a tradition of authorship was developed among the homeless men. They depicted life as it was lived by the Chicago homeless on the road and in the streets. The following poem by Charles Thornburn was printed in *The Hobo News* in August 1921:

> With ever restless tread, they come and go,
> Or lean intent against the grimy wall,
> These men whom fate has battered to and fro,
> In the grim game of life, from which they all
> Have found so much of that which is unkind,
> Still hoping on, that fortune yet may mend,
> With sullen stare, and features hard and lined,
> They wander off to nowhere, and the end.
>
> Their thoughts we may not fathom, in their eyes
> One seems to sense a vision, as though fate
> Had let one little glimpse of fairer skies
> Brighten their souls before she closed the gate.
> Yet have they hopes and dreams which bring them peace,
> Adding to life's flat liquor just the blend
> Called courage, that their efforts may not cease
> To seek the gold, hid at the rainbow's end.

The poetry created by the homeless can be described as a mixture of realistic portrayals of their often difficult and vulnerable lives and a romantic love

of wandering and adventure. Becoming involved in the culture that developed in Hobohemia often meant salvation from the destitution that characterized the life of the homeless; it was a way to create meaning in life.

Anderson provides a rich illustration of Chicago's homeless men at the beginning of this century. His reasoning about 'The hobo' as an adventurer would almost seem to be an empirical investigation of Simmel's social type. But Anderson never refers explicitly to Simmel. In *The Hobo* we become acquainted with the city milieux that the homeless see as their own territories. Individual human fates emerge against the background of historical change in the job market, the city and the public sector. As opposed to Simmel's more pessimistic depiction of modern culture, Anderson gives a varied and empathetic description of the people who populate the city.

The Gold Coast and the Slum

The strength of studies of the big city from the Chicago school lies in the combination of careful ethnographical investigations of different human fates and social types, on the one hand, and mappings of how various districts and subcultures develop in relation to one another, on the other. One study of the latter type is Harvey Zorbaugh's *The Gold Coast and the Slum* (Zorbaugh [1929] 1978).

Zorbaugh takes us with him on a wander through the city's different neighbourhoods and streets. According to Zorbaugh, one can read the city streets in the same way that one reads the strata on a boulder. Different areas have derived their character through the social groups that have populated them. Thieves, bohemians, leftist radicals, immigrants and various unsuccessful characters have found their home in the slum. These people are there for different reasons. Some are there because it is inexpensive to live there, and others because they are attracted to the people who populate the slum and to the environment itself.

In the same geographical area, distinctions are created between different groups. Such demarcation lines can originate from ethnicity, class and a number of other factors. About 30 different nationalities meet in the slum. They bring with them, and develop, different lifestyles, traditions and habits, which later come to characterize those areas of the city where these immigrants establish themselves. Within these different subcultures, a sense of collective solidarity develops, but this cultural pluralism leads, at the same time, to a fragmentation of the city and to conflicts between the various social groups. Zorbaugh writes:

> Yet its streets, teeming with life, thronging with strange people, resounding with outlandish tongues, and the noises of industry and commerce, are pervaded with the glamor and romance of the forward march of the greater city. This glamor and romance, however, exists in

> the social distances that, while they make the city a mosaic of little cultural worlds intriguing to the journalist, the artist and the adventurer, make it impossible for these same little worlds to comprehend one another, and so atomize the life of the city.
>
> (Zorbaugh [1929] 1978: 45)

Not far from the slum, we find a district called the Gold Coast. Although only a stone's throw from the slum in geographical terms, on entering the district we suddenly experience a completely different cultural milieu. On the Gold Coast – where the *nouveaux riches* and more well-to-do people live – the living conditions are in stark contrast to those in the slum. Life here is all about knowing the right people, buying the right clothes, living in the right neighbourhood and so on and so forth. This social game is played using various, subtle status markers. For certain people, this symbolic game becomes a full-time activity:

> One of Chicago's wealthiest 'married maidens' has, for example, a calling list of two thousand names, filling two indexes, which contain merely the names of those to whom she owes obligations, or with whom she must keep in touch to keep in the game. She has to have a secretary to handle her correspondence, to plan her dances and receptions, to send out invitations, acknowledge other invitations, and keep track of her social obligations.
>
> (Zorbaugh [1929] 1978: 55)

The rich live on the Gold Coast. These people are extreme individualists. They have no contact whatsoever with the people living in the slum, except on those occasions when someone decides to pursue some form of charity work.

Not far from the Gold Coast's fashionable district, we find a neighbourhood populated by people who, for some reason, spend a few years in the city. Zorbaugh calls this part of the city 'The world of furnished rooms'. For the most part, the people living here belong to the lower, white middle class. These are people who either study or work, and who are in a reasonable financial situation. According to Zorbaugh, it is these types of people who increasingly leave their mark on the city. They spend some time there, and then move on to the next destination. Their lives are characterized by temporary work and relationships. They are nomads without any real goal. This type of individualization counteracts all forms of collective solidarity.

The solidarity and feelings of community that developed in certain parts of the city became more and more threatened by a way of life that puts the individual first and that is based on temporariness. According to Zorbaugh, this lifestyle, which was first developed by bohemians and intellectuals, affected increasing numbers of people. This resulted in a gradual disintegration of the social safety net and collective solidarity that had been built

up in certain city districts. The rapid development of the city divided the family and led to detraditionalization. The father's occupation was no longer handed down to the son, and the absence of role models in the local environment led to gang formation and criminality. To some extent, this development depended on the hybridization that occurred in the multicultural city:

> Cultures lose much of their identity. The mores tend to lose their sanctions. And in this cosmopolitan world, by virtue of this tolerance of the 'foreign' and interpretation of customs, traditional social definitions lose their meaning, and traditional controls break down. Groups tend to lose their identity, and the social patterns of these groups tend to merge into a hybrid something that is neither Sicilian nor Persian nor Polish, but of the slum.
>
> (Zorbaugh [1929] 1978: 152)

Although Zorbaugh did not regard this development as particularly positive, but instead as a threat to social ties and to the family as a creator of norms, it led to a subsequent development of the picture of the city and to changed relationships between people. Zorbaugh's ideas on hybridization, individualization and alienation can be interpreted as a further development of Simmel's theory of the big city. However, from the study of Chicago's city population, we get a deeper insight into how the interaction between various social groups develops and into the consequences of this development for the city.

From philosophy to journalism

It is obvious that Simmel had a great effect on the type of sociology that developed in Chicago at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, it is more difficult to deduce the exact nature of this influence. The studies of the big city that were carried out by people such as Wirth, Anderson, Zorbaugh and Stonequist, among others, in many ways give us a more varied picture of the city than we are given in Simmel's texts. But it is precisely Simmel's notions about the big city as a mental space, populated by a number of social types, that give structure to the ethnographical studies in Chicago's city environment. And the interactionistic perspective, especially, allows us to understand how the relation between different social groups affected the shaping of the city culture.

Whereas Simmel's increasingly philosophical interpretation of the city and its people – and of form and life – results in a pessimistic view of whether it is possible to live a good life in the modern urban milieu, the Chicago sociologists take as their starting point the innumerable variations that characterize the urban environment. Here, we find both destitution and unlimited

opportunities for experimenting with lifestyles and relationships. Even if many of the analyses point out the negative consequences of the dissolution of traditional structures and the related individualization, we are given the chance to form our own opinion about the processes of change that are described.

Although the same type of criticism of civilization is present both in Simmel's studies of the urban and modern and in those coming out of the Chicago school, there is a difference in approach – one being distant and the other proximate. Simmel's analyses are marked by intellectual distance from the object of study, whereas, for example, Anderson's loving descriptions of homeless men in Chicago reveal a closeness to the people he meets. Simmel also chooses to use social types rather than concrete descriptions of people's lives.

If we read the studies from the Chicago school as a further development of, and variation on, certain of Simmel's ideas, we find that they also function as a bridge to Benjamin's Passage work in Paris, as well as to Goffman's dramaturgical analyses of people's attempts to adapt to the constant changes that characterize the big city and modernity.

Notes

1 Simmel does not explicitly use the notion of identity, but some type of identity concept can be construed from the content of many of his arguments.
2 Simmel is clearly influenced by Marx's discussion of alienation and reification, but does not relate this discussion to the issue of class in the same way that Marx does.
3 Simmel does not use the concept authenticity, which involves some form of genuineness on the part of the individual. However, my interpretation is that this concept is similar to Simmel's descriptions of sociality and 'authentic' individuality.
4 Simmel's ideas are similar to Max Weber's theory on the puritanical character, but also include the notion of consumption as an important mechanism in the capitalistic economy.
5 From Simmel's essay 'The Aesthetic Significance of the Face', from 1901; in Simmel (1959: 279ff).
6 'The Nature of Philosophy', in Simmel (1959: 309). Simmel writes: 'Thus the structure of metaphysical universals is explained: they do not hold for the very particulars of which they seem to be generalizations.'
7 Essay from 1906.