

The Tragedy of Culture and the Culture of Tragedy: Some Remarks on Georg Simmel's Sociology of Culture and His Interpretation of Schopenhauer's Philosophy

Davide Ruggieri
University of Bologna

Abstract

Georg Simmel furnished many profound resources to social sciences and philosophy of culture: his contribution stands as a pillar within the frame of humanities also for his efforts in order to understand his epochal historical-cultural shift. Founding a new science (sociology) crosses to Simmel's conviction to highlight and to explain both modern individual and social lives. In this regard, the question arising from the very sociological field belongs to the need to focus on the new mechanisms in the cultural sphere, that is grasping a radical fracture between "subjective and objective spirit". This paper aims at exploring the interpretation of Schopenhauer's philosophy in the sociology of culture of Georg Simmel towards his cultural theory. Analysing Simmel's works on Schopenhauer and pessimism, it emerges a philosophical and sociological frame which basically fits with some topics regarding his view on the "tragedy of culture". It will be argued through three main phases in Simmel's thought: 1. the question of pessimism (from the early writings to *Philosophie des Geldes*); 2. the discovery of (the "dialectics" of) the tragedy of culture (middle intellectual production); 3. Schopenhauer and the *Lebensphilosophie* (the last writings). Finally, this paper shows the convergence of some Simmelian hints and views with the recent debate in sociological and philosophical fields which argue for a "crisis" theory or for the analysis of the "pathologies of the social life".

Keywords: Simmel, Schopenhauer, pessimism, society, culture, tragedy

In his book *The Metamorphosis of the World* Ulrich Beck claims that our times are characterized by a "predominant cultural pessimism" in which any given catastrophism can become the normal state of the world, even with an

emancipatory effort (Beck 2015; 2016). In this regard, the new task for the sociologists should be to decrypt – in Beck’s words – the contemporary “dystopian and pessimistic constellation.” We are constantly confronted with new pessimistic views (primarily due to the recent economic conjunctures up to the recent pandemic Covid19 scenario), so we cannot easily disengage from any “crisis” category attempt to interpret our times. These crucial facts are not mere measurable through material or economic indicators because they have a cultural effect on our lives and surely contribute to re-shape our social interactions. The crisis itself is a social and cultural construction, according to the “cultural sociology” paradigm of Jeffrey Alexander, and we could feel as a collective “trauma” exactly in the sense that agents share a collective space which consists of social and cultural representations. As Alexander sustains:

“It is by constructing cultural traumas that social groups, national societies, and sometimes even entire civilizations not only cognitively identify the existence and source of human suffering but ‘take on board’ some significant responsibility for it. Insofar as they identify the cause of trauma, and thereby assume such moral responsibility, members of collectivities define their solidary relationships in ways that, in principle, allow them to share the sufferings of others.” (Alexander 2004, 1; Alexander 2012)

Moreover, I advocate that trauma basically generates social and cultural pathologies, that is shared and common experiences impeding the flourishing of the “good life”. Axel Honneth remarked that has come the necessity to detect any form of emerging “pathology of the social” (Honneth 2000) in order to respect and preserve the “good life” of individuals.¹ He explicitly refers to Simmel to explain the genesis of ethical and cultural “crisis” facing modernity as well as to grasp the contradictory and paradoxical nature of the modern social life (Honneth 2002).

According to Georg Simmel, the crisis is the main interpretative category in order to focus on what the modern culture means: the modernity arose from manifold crisis. In other words, we could share the core idea that Simmel is a *Krisis-Denker* as well as a *Zeitdiagnostiker* (Habermas 1986):² he was, in fact, not only a diagnostician of modernity and its paradoxical aspects within individual life but he also assumed

the crisis as the primary subject of his philosophical and sociological inquiries.³ If we interpret crisis to mean “division,” “fracture,” “fragmentarity” (Frisby 1986), “ambivalence” (Nedelmann 1992; Junge 2000), “antinomy,” we can consider Simmel to be one of the most meaningful thinkers who in the so-called *Jahrhundertwende* spent his forces on this subject.⁴

The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer plays a central role in the formation of Simmel’s theoretical investigations and he has a multidimensional function under a hermeneutical meaning. I would like to address Schopenhauer’s legacy in Simmel’s work in three main periods:⁵

- *The question of pessimism* (from the early writings to the *Philosophie des Geldes*)
- *The discovery of (the “dialectics” of) the tragedy of culture* (middle intellectual production)
- *Schopenhauer and the Lebensphilosophie* (the last writings)

Across these periods, Simmel refers to Schopenhauer’s tackling the question of the inner relationship between the explanatory categories of “tragedy” and “culture.” In modernity, they assume a complementary, intertwined definition and role: on the one hand, culture is the product of a tragedy (that is the division of life and its forms, *subjective* and *objective Spirit*); on the other hand, tragedy itself is necessary to feed modern culture (see Mencke 2005).

1. The question of pessimism

“Schopenhauer und Nietzsche” book (Simmel 1907) somehow represents an intermediary phase of diachronic division of Simmel’s interpretation: he discovered Schopenhauer’s philosophy at least twenty years before the publication of this work. In 1887, Simmel wrote an anti-pessimistic crusade titled “Über die Grundfrage des Pessimismus in methodischer Hinsicht”, published in the precious «*Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik*» (Simmel 1989a, 9-19). The profound influence that Schopenhauer’s philosophy exerted on the young *Privatdozent* Simmel is confirmed by his decision to lecture on Schopenhauer and pessimism in his early academic career, almost every year

between 1885 and 1894 (Gassen and Landmann 1958, 343ff.; Köhnke 1996, 194ff.). This is a synthetic prospect of Simmel's lectures during these years:

Figure 1

Synthetic Prospect of Simmel's lessons (source: Köhnke 1996, 194ff.)

Semester/Jahr	Bezeichnung der Vorlesung oder Übung	Zuhörer
SS 1885	<i>Kant's Philosophie/ Über die Sittenlehre Kants</i>	124 (publ.)
WS 1885/1886	<i>Grundzüge der Ethik Über den Pessimismus</i>	16 (priv.) 104 (publ.)
WS 1887/1888	<i>Neueste philosophische Theorien (insbesondere in ihren Beziehungen zu den Naturwissenschaften)</i>	26 (priv.)
	<i>Über den Pessimismus (mit ausführlicher Darstellung der Schopenhauerschen Lehre)</i>	131 (publ.)
WS 1890/1891	<i>Neueste philosophische Theorien (insbesondere in ihren Beziehungen zu den Naturwissenschaften)</i>	16 (priv.)
	<i>Ethik (mit Berücksichtigung sozialer Probleme)</i>	23 (priv.)
	<i>Über den Pessimismus (insbesondere den Schopenhauerschen)</i>	135 (publ.)
WS 1894/1895	<i>Sociologie (mit Berücksichtigung der Geschichte der Familie)</i>	42 (priv.)
	<i>Neueste philosophische Theorien (Philosophischen Theorien der letzten dreißig Jahre)</i>	49 (priv.)
	<i>Über den Pessimismus (insbesondere den Schopenhauerschen)</i>	269 (publ.)

From this framework came the enlightening, aforementioned essay “Über die Grundfrage des Pessimismus”, an invective against pessimism as both a systematic and socio-cultural problem: the pessimism aims to be *empirically* demonstrated on a supposed metaphysical basis. Simmel's polemic target is the “negative *eudaemonological* balance” (Hartmann 1880; 1885) between life's pleasures and pains, as described in the middle of XIXth century by Eduard von

Hartmann's philosophy. In Simmel's essay, Hartmann is surprisingly only cited once and without a precise reference, as was Simmel's tendency. Halfway through the paper, we also encounter Schopenhauer's name, when Simmel asserts that he grounded his metaphysical "will to live" on the preference of Non-being rather than Being because of the *general* existence of pain.

If the requirement of a proportion other than the real proportion between the total suffering and the total pleasure has no objective justification, if the privilege of non-being over being cannot be based on the excessive pain price of joy, then the pessimist still has a logic possible point of view: namely the one adopted by Schopenhauer, according to which it was not the quantitative relationship between pleasure and suffering, but the occurrence of suffering that preferred non-existence to being, because no amount of bliss outweighed even the smallest pain. This is, of course, a matter of personal feeling or metaphysical belief; it does not seem to me methodically refutable alone - any more than its direct reversal in the optimistic sense (Simmel 1989a, 18; *translation mine*)

This is meaningful evidence. While Hartmann defends his theory using a comparison between the pleasures and pains in life, Schopenhauer interprets these as simple "epiphenomenons" of the inexorably hidden essence of reality. Schopenhauer repeatedly highlights ways to rescue our individual existence from illusion and pain, namely with the arts or with *Mit-Leid* ethics. Schopenhauer thus embodies the modern pessimist *κατ'ἔξοχήν*, who defended the worst thought with his best efforts, as Simmel affirmed in "Schopenhauer und Nietzsche":

An aspect of the tragedy in Schopenhauer is that he defends the weaker cause with more impact. He is without a doubt a greater philosopher than Nietzsche. He has a mysterious relation to the absolute of all things that is shared alike by the great philosopher and the great artist. Listening to the depth of his own soul, he awakens the murmurs of the deep reasons of being in himself (Simmel 1991, 12-13; Simmel 1995, 188).

In his personal interpretation of Schopenhauer's philosophy, Simmel constantly deals with an *uncomfortable legacy* (that is pessimism as a consequence of Schopenhauer's metaphysics) and, therefore, his approach to Schopenhauer is continuously characterized by a sort of "double bind." Simmel,

in fact, greatly appreciates Schopenhauer's writings and mentions them frequently, and not always with the intent to criticize. When Simmel compares Nietzsche to Schopenhauer, he sees that the optimistic faith in the eternity of Nietzsche, who probably more than Schopenhauer experienced the tragic path of pessimism, has become the positive *Zarathustra* dogma of the Will to live.

If pessimism cannot stand in an empirical "eudemonological balance,"⁶ as Simmel also demonstrates in "Schopenhauer und Nietzsche" book (Simmel 1995, 241ff.), the pessimistic perspective could be explained as a personal *Stimmung*. This analytical viewpoint is what emerges from another one of Simmel's anonymous articles titled "Zur Psychologie des Pessimismus", published in the "Baltische Monatschrift" journal in 1888. This paper, which Simmel devoted to Wilhelm Dilthey, has the same anti-pessimistic vigour as its predecessor ("Ueber die Grundfrage des Pessimismus"), even though the argumentation is highly reminiscent of Moritz Lazarus' and Heymann Steinthal's *Völkerpsychologie*. In this paper, Simmel's analysis of pessimism is twofold: firstly, pessimism as a "best seller" literary genre (specifically referred to the *belletristische Literatur*) and secondly, pessimism as *Weltanschauung* and a result of some particular *fin de siècle* mood in the European *Zeitgeist*, which is considered a socio-cultural issue.

According to Simmel, within the modernity people require to need and feed more and more the "spectacular" [*das Aparte*]. There is an important difference that abysmally divides pessimism as a *human feeling* and pessimism as a *cultural product*. The former is a mere sceptical, tragic, and nihilistic trend of humankind arising from subjective and solitary reflections; the latter is a function of the public sphere and refers to the objective side of the Spirit [*Geist*] (the cultural products).

The time in which we live is once again one in which everything that is "spectacular", eccentric, exceptional is applauded from the outset and has an appeal. Such a time suggests strong pessimistic trends; for it must have recognized - or believed to recognize - that the general, everyday, bad and worthless and that all good is only a rare, apart; because this is the only way to explain the reversal, which is

just as logically incorrect as it is psychologically understandable, that everything that is distinctive and unusual must also be good and valuable (Simmel 2004b, 221; *translation mine*).

The modern pessimistic philosophers (e.g. Schopenhauer, Tolstoj, Dostojewski) are described by Simmel as *rhetoric thinkers*. They are able to capsize the masses' spirits by convincing them of the "negative value of being" (Simmel 2004b, 224). They use their "rhetoric weapons," the *Zauberung* (*incantation*, to recall some Weber's suggestions) of their words on the stimulus [*Reize*]⁷ of sensory life [*Empfindungsleben*] to persuade the masses that existence is misery. The pessimistic *typus*, as a figure or mask of modern times, turns the positive truth of reality upside down, using his "destroying critique" [*zerstende Kritik*], the other side of its nihilistic *skepsis* (Simmel 2004b, 225).

On this topic, Simmel seems very close to Lukàcs' description of the Critical Theory pessimism through the famous metaphor of the "*Grand-Hotel Abgrund*." According to Simmel, destruction is more satisfying than construction and this conviction plays a role in the "ego-expansion" of the pessimistic-nihilistic *typus*. The pessimist feels this destructive force as the power that feeds his egoity, and thus cannot be an impartial judge of reality. Using sharp-witted wordplay, Simmel claims that the pessimistic thinker judges [*beurtheilt*] the whole world with his thoughts while, at the same time, he despises it [*verurteilt*].⁸

In *Philosophie des Geldes* book, Simmel argues that Schopenhauer basically holds a "pessimistic and quietist *Weltanschauung*" due to his belief in the "permanent quantity of values" (morality, happiness, and knowledge) [*Sittlichkeit, Glück, Erkenntnis*]. Simmel then wrongly assigns to Schopenhauer the conviction of the world containing an *a priori* amount of pleasure and pain – it was actually Hartmann (Hartmann 2012; 2014) –, so that Schopenhauer sees any struggle for life as simply a "dislocation of values" [*Hin- und Herscheiben von Werten*] that cannot shift the fate of the world (Simmel 1989b, 383).

2. The discovery of (the “dialectics” of) the tragedy of culture

The deep interconnectivity emerging in the theoretical organization of the work examining the questions of the *Philosophy of Culture* and the *Philosophy of Life* is very meaningful. The publication of *Philosophie des Geldes* book represents the first attempt to build a systematic philosophy of culture, that is the theory explaining modernity thorough the *money* paradigm. Thus, after 1907, Simmel discovers the “hidden king” [*der «heimliche König» der Geistesepoche*] of his *Zeitgeist* under the category of *Lebensphilosophie* (Simmel 1999, 186); he refers to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche on the one hand and to Henri Bergson on the other. As he testifies in a letter to Herman Graf Keyserling in 1911, Simmel believed that the “highest value” occurring in the XIX century was the *life* concept (Simmel 2008, 956). Lukàcs was ruthless with Simmel, particularly regarding his philosophy of life (Lukàcs 1954). He considered Simmel’s philosophy to be an expression of bourgeois society, in the same vein of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.⁹ Despite Lukàcs’ interpretation (and discrediting) of Simmel’s metaphysics, a highly critical (and self-reflexive) strength is maintained by Simmel’s *Kulturpessimismus*. Simmel does not share with his contemporaries any wailing for the loss of values and stability (Belardinelli 1992): on the contrary, Simmel prefers to enhance the unpredictable and contingent character of modern forms of life.

Schopenhauer’s pessimism is the “symbolic code,” the “signature” of a whole *Zeitgeist*, as Simmel explicitly sustains in *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche* on the issue:

During the past several dozen years, the absolute preponderance of suffering over happiness in life is the definitive portrait of life’s value that gave Schopenhauer’s philosophy its general significance and signature, with respect to the culture of emotion [*Stimmungskultur*] (Simmel 1991, 53; Simmel 1995, 241).

For Simmel, Schopenhauer grasps the processes that internally erode Western culture. It was the collapse of the very transcendence epoch (according to the Judaic-Christian worldview): the *Lebensphilosophie* was merely the achievement of the immanence of life itself and any transcendent issue was

simply resolved using a functionalist view of an interactive process. In his late writings, Simmel uses a language strongly influenced by this conviction. The concept of culture is twofold: according to Simmel's famous intuitions, we may refer to an "objective" and to a "subjective" side; culture is basically a "perfection of the soul" [*Vollendung der Seele*].

I mean for culture the perfection of the soul [*Vollendung der Seele*] that it does not obtain directly from itself (as it happens in its religious deepening, moral purity, primary creativity), but by taking the detour through the structures of the spiritual-historical works; through the science and the forms of life, the art and the State, the profession and the knowledge of the world: this is the cultural path of the subjective spirit [*der Kulturweg des subjektiven Geistes*], on which it returns to itself as a higher and more complete one (Simmel 1999, 37; *translation mine*).

The modern culture then consists of two fundamental self-contradictions [*Selbstwiderspruch der Kultur*]:

1. The technology [*die Technik*] and the proliferation of means (the unforeseeability of series means/aims) – the question of the *rationalization* (intellectualization) of the world
2. The reciprocal extraneousness between objective and subjective culture

The double path of the modern culture is cemented in this contradictory situation. The **tragedy of culture** [*die Tragödie der Kultur*] (Simmel 1999, 42) and the **paradoxes of cultural life** [*Paradoxien des Kulturlebens*] (Simmel 1999, 51) are both shibboleths for Simmel's theory of culture. On the one hand, the tragedy of culture represents the opposition of cultural "objective" forms to the life itself as "subjective spirit;" on the other hand, the paradoxes of cultural life arise from the fact that objective culture (forms) develops more and more quickly and widely, than the "subjective spirit" might embrace.

The idea of the loss of any purpose in modern culture already flourished in his "Schopenhauer und Nietzsche" book, where Simmel purports that the conscience is trapped in a web of means and technology grows without limit, by becoming itself an ultimate end.

[...] consciousness is bound up with the means, whereas the final goals which import sense and meaning into the intermediate steps

are pushed toward our inner horizon and finally beyond it. Technology, which is the sum total of the means of a civilized existence, becomes the essential object of struggle and evaluation. Thus, people are eventually surrounded everywhere by a criss-crossing jungle of enterprises and institutions in which the final and definitely valuable goals are missing altogether (Simmel 1991, 3-4; Simmel 1995, 176-177).

This absolute absence of any end has become the legitimation of cultural pessimism: life is the central topic for both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, who philosophically embody the modern culture. Such as the *Will to live* has no other end but itself, so the modern culture is the pure process, the pure function that becomes absolute “form.”

According to Simmel, in the history of philosophy Schopenhauer attests to the discovery of the negative character of Being (the negative ontology *tout court*), and thus underlines a “formal difference” [*formale Differenz*] between being and conscience. Humankind is able to “represent” reality using “intellectual” categories, even if the discrepancy between being and representation can never be overcome. The metaphysics of Will to live is beyond the difference between rationalism and irrationalism because Will simply represents what is “over” the conscience and not what stands against it. In this regard, Schopenhauer is “deeper” and more “radical” than Kant and Marx.

Schopenhauer has the courage to proclaim a radicalism which he creates to evade the concept of man as a rational being: the images of consciousness which limit our empirical life do not enclose the reality of our being and, indeed, cannot even touch it because this being is not of the same essence as rational consciousness (Simmel 1991, 30; Simmel 1995, 211).

According to Schopenhauer’s metaphysical perspective, the world is the “representation of a radical contradiction” [*die Welt ist die Darstellung des radikales Widerspruch*] (Simmel 1995, 239); this is a very synthetic prospect of Simmel’s interpretation of the metaphysics of Will. Schopenhauer’s view is a “metaphysics of conflict” (Ruggieri 2016). It consists of a clear division (1) – that is the first metaphysical dualism – between the world as Will (unitary) and the world as Idea/Representation (characterized by its fragmentarity):

according to Simmel, the world *as* representation legitimizes the reality we perceive in “relational” (Donati 2011; 2015) and “reciprocal” terms (Simmel 1995: 221). The same double impulse (2) – the second dualism – is found in the destiny of our “personality,” which lays as a contended issue between the typical modern need for superficiality and the need for depth, between misapprehension and truth. The third dualism (3) from Schopenhauer’s doctrine is the fracture between the scientific and the metaphysical human essence [*dem wissenschaftlichen und dem metaphysischen Menschen*]: since Schopenhauer discovers the non-rational character of the inner essence of the world, science and metaphysics must relate to their own world and language (Simmel 1995, 231-232). Schopenhauer has reversed the Hegelian motto, and thus contends “[...] all that is real is irrational [*alles was wirklich ist, unvernünftig ist*]” (Simmel 1995, 234).

3. Simmel, Schopenhauer, and the *Lebensphilosophie*

It’s quite difficult to draw conclusions about Simmel’s *Schopenhauerismus*, if we reduce to exclusively consider his theory as development of Schopenhauer’s philosophy (see Ruggieri 2008; Jeske *et al.* 2014; Kohl 2018). However, Franz Mockrauer, President of the Schopenhauer-Gesellschaft and Hans Simmel’s schoolmate in Berlin (then he probably knew directly his father Georg), ascribes Simmel’s thought to the current of those philosophers that refer to themselves (directly or not) as the *Schopenhauerismus*. Particularly because of the use of *Intuitionism* and a “metaphysical explanation of world” in *Lebensphilosophie*, Mockrauer was quick to associate Simmel’s philosophy and methodology with Schopenhauer’s (Mockrauer 1925, 34-36).

We can hold that *Schopenhauerism* deals with Simmel’s specific views on culture later in his career. Simmel offers, within the crisis of philosophy, a possible new path and he considers the *Lebensphilosophie* as a new impulse and a new beginning for philosophy itself.¹⁰ This conviction covers philosophy as well as sociology, as Simmel focuses in his last writing on any attempt to assess a *Lebensphilosophie* beside a *Lebenssoziologische Projekt* (Ruggieri 2017; Seyfert 2008; 2019).

Schopenhauer is considered to be the “father of the modern *Lebensphilosophie*” as Fellmann explicitly claims (Fellmann 1996, 280). This citation is very close to Michael Landmann’s words:

Schopenhauer is the first to pursue the philosophy of knowledge as a philosophy of life. While he considers cognition not only immanent, but also in its regard to life and he locates it within the global reality of humankind, a deeper reality of the cognition flourishes to him (Landmann 1957, XXXIX; *translation mine*).

Both of these statements fit with the ideas espoused by Simmel, who claimed in his lectures on the history of philosophy in the *Wintersemester* 1913/14:

Schopenhauer is the first philosopher who philosophies on life in a modern manner [*er ist der erste Philosoph, der über das Leben im modern Sinne philosophiert*]” (Simmel 2012, 123; *translation mine*).

According to Simmel, Schopenhauer asks for the *value* of life itself,¹¹ since he renounces to inquiry life under a particular form. In this regard, Schopenhauer is the first *Lebensphilosoph* of modernity. Life is both the *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem* of his metaphysics and his epistemology¹².

Simmel often uses Schopenhauer’s famous incipit *Die Welt ist “meine Vorstellung”* to address his interpretation of the metaphysical issue, for instance, in his course on the history of philosophy, claiming “*Die Welt ist mein Erlebnis*” (Simmel 2012, 124) and in *Soziologie*, namely the *Excursus: wie ist die Gesellschaft möglich?*, where he argues for an explication of the three sociological *a priori*, proclaiming that “*Die Gesellschaft ist meine Vorstellung*” (Simmel 1992, 44).

Schopenhauer’s contribution to the *Lebensphilosophie* tradition is formally presented by Simmel in “Schopenhauer und Nietzsche”. Simmel explicitly claimed: “Die Philosophie Schopenhauers ist der absolute, philosophische Ausdruck für diesen inneren Zustand der modernen Menschen” (Simmel 1995, 178). Some lines before, Simmel draws a draft – typical of his style – of an “unexpressed” anthropology, imbuing humankind with an “indirect essence” [*indirekte Wesen*]. Humankind is characterized by the pursuit of objects through indirect and mediated ways. Humankind is able to construct cultural forms (e.g. science, art, ethics, technology) to grasp

inner ends. Cultural forms should represent simple means, yet they become “uncountable” ends that humankind hangs on to but cannot completely grasp and gather anymore. They become *values* and we lose the meaning of the near ends. We are, as Simmel sustains, “prisoners in a network of pure means, detours, and temporariness [*Mittel, Umwege, Vorläufigkeiten*]” (Simmel 1995, 177).

The epochal turn in the history of ideas, provided by Schopenhauer, is again commented on by Simmel in his essay *Der Konflikt der modernen Kultur* (1918).

Schopenhauer is the modern philosopher who, within the deepest and decisive enquires, does not ask about any *content* of life, ideas or beings, but exclusively: What is life? What is its meaning as pure life? (Simmel 1999, 188; *translation mine*).

In early January 1912, Simmel gives three seminars in Vienna with the title “Die Philosophien des Lebens,” in which he basically tackles the question of *Lebensphilosophie* through three philosophical portraits, namely “Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Bergson” (Simmel 2016: 630) as he had planned (and testified to) in a letter to his colleague Heinrich Rickert in late 1911 (Simmel 2008, 1020-1022). In the *Sommersemester* of 1915, he lectures then Strasbourg on the “Ethics in Schopenhauer’s Philosophy” (Simmel 2016, 622).

During this period, Simmel is constantly considering the topic of the “Tragödie der Kultur,” that is the understanding of modernity under the conflict between life and its forms, primarily the *cultural* forms. To Simmel, modern culture resembles an “illness.” In many of his works from this period, Simmel focuses on the concept of the “pathology of culture” [*Pathologie der Kultur*] (Simmel 1999, 40). This formulation is formally presented in the essay *Die Krisis der Kultur*, that is Simmel’s speech in Vienna in 1916, and it supports the other systematic formulations found in “Tragödie der Kultur.” The unrestrained character of the increasing means illustrates the impermanence of any given end and this is a sign of the illness infecting our culture. The more the means increase, that is the *intellectualization* or rationalization of life addressed by Simmel in *Philosophy of money*¹³, the more we lose sight of our purposes and ends. This process has an immediate effect on our

personal lives because we gradually lose the emotional disposition toward life and the character of our personality.

In his essay “The Individual Law”, Simmel uses the metaphor of the dialectics health and illness, borrowing from an ancient Jewish proverb, to explain the relationship between individuality and universality within the morality issue. The original proverb suggests that it is perplexing that God created a manifold of illnesses yet only one health. Simmel defined health as the “normal functionality of any organism towards its minimal particular parts” (Simmel 1999: 369); similarly, morality and culture can be canonically considered as an organism in which each particular aspect serves to function the whole. Modernity well-illustrates the illness described in *Die Krisis der Kultur*.¹⁴

The most persuasive defence of Simmel’s definition of culture is found in “Der Begriff und die Tragödie der Kultur” (1911). Culture consists of two interweaving components: the subjective spirit and the objective products. The path to cultural acquisition requires the subjective spirit to abandon its “subjectivity.”¹⁵ the tragedy of culture exists in the destructive and erosive power of these objective elements over the subjective “forces.” Hence, Simmel asserts:

It is the concept of culture consisting of the spirit [*Geist*] creating something independently objective through which the development of the subject takes its path from itself to itself; but precisely that integrating and culture-conditioned element is predetermined by a self-development, which still consumes the forces of the subjects, still drives subjects on their way, without thereby leading them to the peak of themselves: the development of the subjects can no longer now get the path given by those objects; nevertheless, following them, it runs down a dead end or in an emptiness of innermost and most intrinsic life (Simmel 2001, 219; *translation mine*).

This is the tragic “achievement” of the modernity and the paradoxical path of cultural forms. This conviction becomes more and more seductive and effective during the era of the World War I. That which gives stability and identity (e.g. values such “labour,” “love,” “thinking,” “willing” and “religiosity”) is destined to waver and fail; when the victory of a nation becomes the primary aim, the nude life turns into a simple means.

This inversion of the “teleological series” is at the core of the mechanism in modernity and Schopenhauer certainly is the *maître à penser* of many intellectuals who shared this idea. Splengler, Weber, Klages, and many more of Simmel’s contemporaries were convinced of this “teleological inversion” in the modern *Zeitgeist*. I use the term “teleological inversion” to denote the Simmelian theoretical framework according to which a totality (e.g. social, cultural, individual) is organized in order to respond to the pure mechanisms of the mean (to become an autonomous end) and their *formal* constellation: the “money” paradigm, or the reciprocal processes within an immanent logic mediated by forms.

In conclusion, the tragedy of culture consists of the loss of the subjective recognition towards any objectivation (that is, cultural forms) and, vice versa, the culture of tragedy is the achievement of the inversion of the teleological series as well as the admission that the world has lost its meaning and its values. Modernity requires a constantly increasing “differentiation” variable and an individual predisposition to “reciprocity.” This is not only the tragic destiny of Western society but can also be envisioned as a positive factor that enables more novel forms of subjectivity and individual liberty to flourish, and thus weakens the pessimistic view of Simmel’s tragedy of culture. This represents surely a challenge for social theory, as it testifies not only to the claim of an increasingly “objectified” society but also the possibility of new forms of subjectivities. In this regard, we can look back to Simmel and refer to his work toward building a new critical theory in the path of the dialectics of the tragedy of culture and the new forms of social lives in the era of globalization. Axel Honneth literally affirms that the social philosophy has “[...] to reveal the moral constraints underlying social interaction on different levels in this form of society.” In other words, social philosophy should represent “[...] the general idea – I quote – that the inclusion of members of society always takes place through the mechanism of mutual recognition – that is how individuals learn to intersubjectively affirm one another in particular respects or facets of their personalities” (Honneth 2003, 249).

This statement could be read as an ideal persistence and corroboration of Simmel's theoretical intuitions.

NOTES

¹ Honneth identifies the birth of sociology (including Georg Simmel's theory) as the systematic answer to the modern ethical crisis, namely showing how the sociology of culture is assimilated to the diagnostician responding to a "pathology of the social" [*Pathologie des Sozialen*]. Regarding Simmel's theory, it is partially true, since the ethical issue is surely very thick and urgent, but he did not furnish any "condemnation" or "absolution" of the tragedy of culture under the meaning of a good life, as Honneth does. For Simmel, the role of sociology is neither to condemn nor to legitimize: it simply aims to explain the social and cultural realm, which he explicitly states in *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben*.

² He is surely a "transitional thinker" in the path of a pessimistic theory on modernity and the destiny of the individuals, such as some of his eminent contemporaries such as Tönnies and Weber (Pyythinen 2008: 295).

³ In this regard, Klaus Lichtblau in *Kulturkrise und Soziologie um die Jahrhundertwende* considered Simmel as one of the most representative thinkers of his epoch (Lichtblau 1996).

⁴ Similarly, Ulrich Beck (Beck, 1997a; 1997b) and Axel Honneth (Honneth, 2002; 2010) recently described, in a different manner, the *Globalisierung-Prozess* as a self-contradictory phase of the "Second Modernity."

⁵ It substantially fits with Max Friescheisen-Köhler's systematic-diachronic division of Simmel's thought in three main areas: 1. *Soziologie*; 2. *Philosophie der Kultur*; 3. *Metaphysik des Lebens* (Frischeisen-Köhler, 1919).

⁶ In the essay *Über die Grundfrage des Pessimismus*, the decisive proof of an impossible balance between pleasure and pain is given by the irreducible incommensurableness between the two. It is inconceivable to think of compensating a pain with a calculated pleasure; there is no precise criterion (or "scale") to determine the value to assign to both. Simmel talked in economic terms, saying that it is impossible to think of ransoming a pain, as we could "pay" it with a price or change it with a pleasure (Simmel, 1989a: 11-12). The value of something is set by the relation between the available merchandise and the concrete existent money. In the case of pleasure and pain, it is impossible to set such relations because we cannot calculate a definite existent number of pleasures and pains. Simmel upheld that we also cannot define a stable value towards creating a *commercium* for pleasure and pain because "[...] the price is nothing but the analytical expression for the relationship between available money and available goods" (Simmel 1989a: 13).

⁷ It is interesting and bizarre that in German *Reiz* means "stimulus," a sensorial impulse in a physiological meaning, but also "fascination." Simmel may have used a word with double meaning intentionally.

⁸ “[...] Er wie der landläufige Pessimismus gleichsam mit einem Worte die ganze Welt nicht nur beurtheilt, sondern auch verurtheilt [...]” (Simmel, 2004: 229).

⁹ “Die Lebensphilosophie ist die herrschende Ideologie der ganzen imperialistische Periode in Deutschland [...] Die Lebensphilosophie, wie sie in die imperialistische Periode als philosophische Richtung auftritt und sich entfaltet, ist ein spezifischer Produkt dieser Zeit: der Versuch, von Standpunkt der imperialistischen Bourgeoisie und ihrer parasitären Intelligenz jene Fragen philosophisch zu beantworten, die von der gesellschaftlichen Entwicklung, von den neuen Formen des Klassenkampfes gestellt wurde”(Lukács, 1962: 351-352).

¹⁰ Extensive literature exists on this topic. I have limited this discussion to the most meaningful: H.Rickert, *Die Philosophie des Lebens. Darstellung und Kritik der philosophischen Modeströmungen unserer Zeit*, Mohr, Tübingen 1920; O.F.Bollnow, *Die Lebensphilosophie*, Springer, Berlin-Göttingen-Heidelberg 1959; R.Gorsen, *Zur Phänomenologie des Bewußtseinsstroms*, Bouvier, Bonn 1966; M.Großheim, *Von Georg Simmel zu Martin Heidegger. Philosophie zwischen Leben und Existenz*, Bouvier, Bonn 1991; F. Fellmann, *Lebensphilosophie. Elemente einer Theorie der Selbsterfahrung*, Rohwolt, Hamburg 1993. See also: H.Müller, *Lebensphilosophie und Religion bei Simmel*, Duncker&Humblot, Leipzig 1960.

¹¹ Simmel explicitly questions: “*Was ist das Leben in sich Wert?*” (Simmel 2012: 124).

¹² Maybe Max Scheler, who lectured in Köln (1921-22), referring to Simmel’s work, really grasped this idea when he used the word “Umdrehung” (Scheler 2005: 122) to explain the reciprocal effect between the act and the subject (i.e. between life itself and its forms or values) in the construction of knowledge and universal cognition (Ruggieri 2018).

¹³ Simmel explicitly writes: “[...] since the whole structure of means is one of a causal connection viewed from the front, the practical world too increasingly becomes a problem for the intelligence. To put it more precisely, the conceivable elements of action become objectively and subjectively calculable rational relationships and in so doing progressively eliminate the emotional reactions and decisions which only attach themselves to the turning points of life, to the final purposes” (Simmel 2004a: 435; Simmel 1989b: 594).

¹⁴ In his wartime writings, Simmel often uses a “pathological” language: it recurs when he explicitly talks about the “pathology of culture” in the essay *Krisis der Kultur* (1916) and he defines the war itself as an epidemic “fever” in *Die Idee Europa* (1915). These texts are organic developments of the Simmel’s themes and analysis of culture. Patrick Watier has remarked that the *War writings* must not be considered as atypical or extraneous to Simmel’s intellectual work (Watier 1991: 219-233).

¹⁵ “Culture arises - and this is what is absolutely essential for its understanding - by bringing together two elements, none of which it could exist for itself: the subjective soul and the objectively intellectual product. [...] So the subjective spirit has to leave its subjectivity but not its spirituality in order to experience the relationship to the object through which its cultivation takes place. This is the only way in which the dualistic form of existence -

directly set with the existence of the subject - is organized into an internally uniform relationship" (Simmel 2001: 198-199; *translation mine*).

REFERENCES

Alexander, Jeffrey. 2004. "Toward a Theory of cultural Trauma". In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, J. Alexander *et al.* (eds.), 1-30. London & Berkeley: University of California Press.

_____. 2012. *Trauma. A social Theory*. Melden-Cambridge: Polity Press.

Beck, Ulrich. 1997a. *Was ist Globalisierung? - Irrtümer des Globalismus – Antworten auf Globalisierung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

_____. 1997b. *Perspektiven der Weltgesellschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

_____. 2015. "Emancipatory catastrophism: What does it mean to climate change and risk society?" *Current Sociology* 63(1): 75–88.

_____. 2016. *The Metamorphosis of the World: How Climate Change is Transforming Our Concept of the World*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Belardinelli, Sergio. 1992. "Kulturpessimismus' gestern und heute." *Geschichte und Gegenwart* 3: 159-171.

Donati, Pierpaolo. 2011. *Relational Sociology. A new paradigm for the social sciences*. Routledge: London.

_____. 2015. "Manifesto for a critical realist relational sociology." *International Review of Sociology: Revue Internationale de Sociologie* 25(1): 86-109.

Fellmann, Ferdinand. 1996. *Schopenhauer*. In *Geschichte der Philosophie im 19. Jahrhundert. Positivismus, Linkshegelianismus, Existenzphilosophie, Neukantianismus, Lebensphilosophie* hrsg. von F. Fellmann, 273-291. Hamburg: Reinbek.

Frischeisen-Köhler, Max. 1919. "Georg Simmel." *Kant-Studien*, 24: 1-51.

Frisby, David. 1986. *Fragments of Modernity. Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer, and Benjamin*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1986. *Simmel als Zeitdiagnostiker*. In *Philosophische Kultur: Gesammelte Essays*, von G. Simmel, 7-17. Berlin: Wagenbach.

Hartmann, Eduard (von). 1880. *Zur Geschichte und Begründung des Pessimismus*. Berlin: Ducker.

_____. 1885. „Zur Pessimismus-Frage.“ In *Philosophische Fragen der Gegenwart*, 78-102. Leipzig: Wilhelm Friedrich.

_____. 2012. *Pessimismus: Zur Geschichte und Begründung*. Innsbruck: University of Innsbruck Auflage. [Reprint der Originalausgabe von 1891].

_____. 2014. *Philosophie des Unbewußten Vollständiger Text der Zweite Auflage*. Berlin: Berliner Auflage.

Honneth, Axel. 2000. *Pathologien des Sozialen. Tradition und Aktualität der Sozialphilosophie*. In *Das Andere der Gerechtigkeit*, 11-69. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

_____. 2002. *Organisierte Selbstverwirklichung. Paradoxien der Individualisierung*. In *Befreiung aus der Mündigkeit. Paradoxien des gegenwärtigen Kapitalismus*, 141-158. Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag.

_____. 2003. *The Point of Recognition: a Rejoinder to the Rejoinder*. In *Redistribution or Recognition: A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, edited by Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, 237-268. London-New York: Verso

_____. 2010. *Das Ich im Wir. Studien zur Erkenntnistheorie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Jeske, Michael et al. 2014. *Wirkung*. In *Schopenhauer-Handbuch*, hrsg. von D. Schubbe und M. Koßler, 259-397. Stuttgart J.B. Metzler.

Junge, Matthias. 2000. *Ambivalente Gesellschaftlichkeit: Die Modernisierung der Vergesellschaftung und die Ordnungen der Ambivalenzbewältigung*. Opladen: Leske+Budrick,.

Kohl, Sara. 2018. *Georg Simmel*. In *Schopenhauer-Handbuch*, hrsg. von D. Schubbe und M. Koßler, 314-317. Stuttgart J.B. Metzler.

Landmann, Michael. 1957. *Schopenhauer heute*. In *Ueber die vierfache Wurzel des Satzes vom zureichenden Grunde*, von A. Schopenhauer. Hamburg: Felix Meiner.

Lukács, György. 1954. *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft*. Berlin: Aufbau Verlag.

Lichtblau, Klaus. 1996. *Kulturkrise und Soziologie um die Jahrhundertwende: zur Genealogie der Kultursoziologie in Deutschland*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Menke, Christoph. 2005. *Die Gegenwart der Tragödie. Versuch über Urteil und Spiel*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Mockrauer, Franz. 1925. "Schopenhauers Stellung in der Philosophie der Gegenwart." *Jahrbuch der Schopenhauer-Gesellschaft* 12 [1923-1925]: 26-60.

Nedelmann, Birgitta. 1992. "Ambivalenz als vergesellschaftendes Prinzip." *Simmel Newsletter* 2(1): 36-47.

Pyythinen, Olli. 2008. "Ambiguous Individuality: Georg Simmel on the 'Who' and the 'What' of the Individual." *Human Studies* 3: 279-298

Ruggieri, Davide. 2016. "The metaphysics of conflict: some reflections on Schopenhauer's politics." *Revista Voluntas: Estudos sobre Schopenhauer* 7(1): 140-154.

_____. 2017. "Georg Simmel and the 'Relational Turn'. Contributions to foundation of the *Lebenssoziologie* since Simmel." *Simmel Studies* 21(1): 43-71.

_____. 2018. "Die Umdrehung der Werte: The Ambivalent Intellectual Relationship between Georg Simmel and Max Scheler." *Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy* X (2): 267-294.

Scheler, Max. 2005. *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie – Die deutsche Philosophie der Gegenwart*, GW VII. München: Francke.

Seyfert, Robert. 2008. *Zum historischen Verhältnis von Lebensphilosophie und Soziologie und das Programm einer Lebenssoziologie*. In *Die Natur der Gesellschaft*, hrsg. von K.S. Rehberg, 4684-4694. Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus.

_____. 2019. *Lebenssoziologie - eine intensive Wissenschaft*. In H.Delitz et al. (Eds), *Soziologien des Lebens*. Bielefeld: Transcript.

Simmel, Georg. 1989a. *Aufsätze 1887-1890. Über soziale Differenzierung. Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*, GSG 2. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

_____. 1989b. *Philosophie des Geldes*, GSG 6. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp,

_____. 1991. *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

_____. 1992. *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*, GSG 11. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

_____. 1995. *Philosophie der Mode. Die Religion, Kant und Goethe. Schopenhauer und Nietzsche*, GSG 10. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

_____. 1999. *Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen. Grundfragen der Soziologie. Vom Wesen des historischen Verstehens. Der Konflikt der modernen Kultur. Lebensanschauung*, GSG 16. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

_____. 2001. *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1909-1918*, Band I, GSG 12. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp,

_____. 2004a. *Philosophy of money*. London-NewYork: Routledge.

_____. 2004b. *Miszellen, Glossen, Stellungnahmen, Umfrageantworten, Leserbriefe, Diskussionsbeiträge 1889-1918, Anonyme und pseudonyme Veröffentlichungen 1888-1920*, GSG 17. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

_____. 2008. *Briefe 1880-1911*, GSG 22. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

_____. 2012. *Kollegshefte und Mitschriften*, GSG 21. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

_____. 2016. *Nachträge. Dokumente. Gesamtbibliographie. Übersichten. Indices*, GSG 24. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Watier, Patrick. 1991. "The War Writings of Georg Simmel." *Theory, Culture & Society* 8(3): 219-233.

Daive Ruggieri (PhD) is Research Fellow at the Department of Political and social sciences of the University of Bologna; Senior Assistant Professor for Sociology of cultural and communicative processes. His main research field tackles the history of sociological theory. He particularly focuses on Georg Simmel's sociology, Critical Theory, and the relational sociology. His main academic and scientific interests deal with the relation culture/individualization within the social processes. Research and archive activities abroad in the Universities of Mainz, Frankfurt am Main, Bielefeld, and Munich. Author of many publications, he attended to various scientific national and international conferences.

Address:

Daive Ruggieri

Department of Political and Social Sciences

Alma Mater Studiorum - University of Bologna

Via Giacomo della Torre, 1

47121 Forlì

Email: davide.ruggieri3@unibo.it

<https://www.unibo.it/sitoweb/davide.ruggieri3/en>

Orcid id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7046-6637>