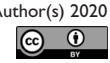
Article

JCS

Journal of Classical Sociology
1–15



DOI: 10.1177/1468795X20980638
journals.sagepub.com/home/jcs


‘The metropolis and the life of spirit’ by Georg Simmel: A new translation

John D Boy
Leiden University, The Netherlands

Abstract

Two previous English translations of this classic essay by Georg Simmel have been in wide circulation, shaping the worldwide reception of Simmel’s urban theory. Both rendered Simmel’s philosophical idiom in psychologistic terms, translating *Seele* (soul) as ‘psyche’ and *Geist* (spirit) as ‘mind’. With their overtones of behaviourism, earlier translations bear the clear mark of their time. This translation seeks to return, as much as is possible without sacrificing lucidity, to Simmel’s original idiom, in the hope that this will contribute to an imaginative rediscovery of this classic text. The introduction to the new translation gives an overview of the publication’s historical and intellectual context, its reception and influence, and the distinctiveness of Simmel’s approach.

Keywords

Chicago School, Georg Simmel, translation, urban sociology, urban theory

General introduction

Simmel’s urban theory in context

The following essay by Georg Simmel (1903) has long been considered a classic. First published, it was initially a presentation given in the run-up to the Municipal Exposition in Dresden in the summer of that year. The Exposition had been a few years in the making and hoped to provide a comprehensive picture of the state of the art in German municipal administration. Participants were mainly representatives of municipalities exchanging what today we might call ‘best practices’ for how to govern quickly growing cities. Prussian cities, in particular, underwent expansion and restructuring during the so-called Founder’s Period (*Gründerzeit*), and their administration was regarded as exemplary. The Exposition was thus seen as a landmark event warranting extensive

Corresponding author:
John D Boy, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, Leiden University, P.O. Box 9555, 2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands.
Email: j.d.boy@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

The Municipal Exposition of 1903 (source: Wikimedia Commons).

coverage in the *American Journal of Sociology*.[1] What made the Dresden Exposition particularly remarkable was that it predated the development of a town planning culture, which took shape after World War I (Freestone and Amati, 2014).

The talks held by Simmel and other scholars preceded the actual Exposition, and were organised to prepare the intellectual ground for the Exposition itself. Sponsored by the Gehe Foundation and aimed at a broad public interested in the human sciences, these talks were collected in a volume of the Foundation's yearbook, edited by the Saxonian statistician Theodor Petermann. Aside from Simmel's contribution, the yearbook contained texts by the economist Karl Bücher, the geographer Friedrich Ratzel, the statistician Georg von Mayr, the economist Heinrich Eugen Waentig, and the historian Dietrich Schäfer. Petermann also included a text of his own on the intellectual life of cities, inserted as a backhanded critique of Simmel for breaking from the overall theme of the book by talking about the subjective responses of *individual* city dwellers and not making his contributions about cities per se. This was probably specious, given what we now know about intrigues against Simmel by his fellow academics, including Schäfer, the historian in the volume, who later penned an assessment of Simmel dripping with anti-Semitic tropes that cost him a professorship in Heidelberg (Liebeschütz, 1970: 109).

It is true that, in his essay, Simmel picks up a particular fragment of urban life and theorises the city from there. An uncharitable reading would hold that Simmel is writing about *his* spirit, rather than spirit in general (Jazbinsek, 2003). However, his approach in this essay is in keeping with his view that modern life presents itself in fragmentary fashion, but that upon close inspection, each of these fragments contains within itself a totality. In his studies, David Frisby (1985, 1992) made the point strongly that Simmel was a sociologist of modernity as a whole, rather than any individual specialty. Paul

Nolte (1998) has reconstructed a whole research programme for an anthropology of modernity in Simmel's work, which the metropolis essay epitomises.

It is worth briefly discussing how Simmel's essay compares to that other great classic of sociological thinking on cities, Max Weber's (1958) *The City*. Written nearly twenty years after Simmel,[2] Weber's study is historical, comparative, and typological, and hence macrocosmic in orientation, while Simmel's essay is microcosmic. Sigmund (1993) has stated that Simmel's essay, with its feel for the dramaturgy of metropolitan life, could not have been written in the quaint Heidelberg milieu in which Weber worked for most of his life. Despite such differences in style and approach, both emphasise individual freedom and greater choice in cities. Unlike Simmel, however, Weber did not think that impersonal relations were inherently part of urban life. Rather, he stated that the degree of impersonality depends on cultural conditions. Scholars influenced by Weber's work pursued a 'Weberian' research programme concentrating on the development of institutions such as markets and states.

Considering the reception of Simmel's essay, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of the Chicago School. Albion Small, the first chair of the sociology department at the University of Chicago, tirelessly tried to bring Simmel into American social thought (Aronowitz, 1994). The *American Journal of Sociology*, which Small edited, published him in translation multiple times. The textbook *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, better known as the 'Green Bible', contained numerous selections from Simmel's work. Thanks to these efforts, Simmel was one of the, if not *the*, strongest European intellectual influence on the otherwise mostly homegrown enterprise of American sociology in these early years (Levine et al., 1976a, 1976b). The only others who came close were Herbert Spencer and French founding figures like Auguste Comte and Gabriel Tarde.[3] Simmel directly influenced Small and his successor Robert Park – they both had direct contact with him during their brief stints studying in Germany – as well as a number of other nodal figures in the emerging American sociological community. Chicago became a place where Simmel was taught, revered, and translated (see Abbott, 2017).

In this early period, Simmel was mainly read for his 'formal' understanding of interaction and conflict. His work on the metropolis was not translated into English or widely studied until a later generation came along.[4] This generation included Louis Wirth, Everett Hughes and Edward Shils, who continued the tradition of Simmel scholarship and published a wider selection of his work in translation from 1950 onwards. Wirth's (1938) essay 'Urbanism as a way of life' developed Simmelian themes and became an instant classic.

On the east coast, Simmel was revered by influential scholars in American sociology, most of them German émigrés, including Reinhard Bendix, Lewis Coser, Hans Gerth, Kurt Lewin and Kurt Wolff. However, despite his early influence, Talcott Parsons (1949) cut Simmel out of the canon – quite literally, by removing a chapter he had reportedly written on Simmel from his epoch-making *The Structure of Social Action*. Since then, several scholars have worked to broaden how Simmel is read – among them Don Levine, David Frisby, Gianfranco Poggi, Elizabeth Goodstein and Olli Pyyhtinen – but these efforts never restored his initial influence.

As a result, Simmel's incorporation into social thought was piecemeal, as Aronowitz (1994) has put it. The ambitious sweep of his *Philosophy of Money* largely ignored,

Simmel (1978) came to be seen as a theorist of a small slice of the sociological present, not its totality. The overriding conflict he invokes at the outset of his metropolis essay – the clash between 'individual and supraindividual contents of life' that results in historically specific formations of character and mentality – was no longer centred, only specific diagnoses, like the famous 'blasé attitude'. Because Simmel's thinking was only appreciated piecemeal, the debates that took hold around this essay also did not engage with the full breadth of his claims. Instead, his argument was often reconstructed as the 'density–pathology hypothesis' (Choldin, 1978). In this reconstruction, the city is an 'independent variable' that has psychological effects on city dwellers.[5] This was taken up in the work of scholars beyond sociology; the renowned psychologist Stanley Milgram (1970), for instance, derived a model of overload from Simmel and Wirth to understand the experience of cities.

This heritage of behaviourist readings of Simmel later proved problematic for several reasons. First, the density–pathology correlation did not hold up empirically (see Fischer, 1976). Second, once urbanisation of American society was near total, the idea of taking the city as an 'independent variable' no longer made sense. Wirth had already stated that urbanism as a way of life was not exclusive to cities in his similarly ground-breaking essay. The postwar decades rendered urban–rural divides obsolete, even before Henri Lefebvre's (2003) *Urban Revolution* declared the age of 'planetary urbanisation'. The causal effects of cities were now inextricable, making them a dubious object of analysis in the eyes of some scholars (Manheim, 1960; Webber, 1968).

Such refutations notwithstanding, scholars around the world consider Simmel's essay a landmark reference to this day. At Humboldt University in Berlin, the successor institution of his *alma mater*, the influential Centre for Metropolitan Studies now bears Simmel's name. Bibliometric databases show that the essay is regularly cited in fields ranging from environmental science to cultural studies and from marketing to sociology. Drawing on the Simmelian sociologist Murray Davis (1971), we may take the ongoing interest as a sign that readers perceive his theory as *interesting* in the sense that it challenges their thinking in ways that go beyond mid-range empirical claims. Even so, urban theory has also struggled to step out of the long shadow of Simmel's work. From Janet Abu-Lughod (1961) to Jennifer Robinson (2015), scholars interested in cities of the global south and comparative urbanism have emphasised *variation* in the form of city life. Without denying the applicability of Simmel's ideas beyond the time and place of their conception, urban scholars nonetheless argue for 'new geographies' of theory to enrich imagination. While I recognise the importance of such calls to produce new understandings (see Roy, 2009), I think that urban theory may also be enriched by revisiting and rereading some of the field's classic texts. It is my hope that this new translation will make such imaginative rediscovery possible.

A note on the new translation

Two previous translations of this essay have been in wide circulation: The first was by Edward Shils, produced in the mid-1930s, and the second by Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, from the late 1940s. Both opted to render Simmel's philosophical idiom in psychologistic terms, translating *Seele* (soul) as 'psyche', *Geist* (spirit) as 'mind', and

geistig (spiritual) as 'mental'. With their overtones of behaviourism, these translations bear the mark of their time.

I have opted to return, as much as is reasonably possible without sacrificing lucidity, to Simmel's idiom. Social thought in the early twentieth century felt the need to 'secularise' the inherited language of spirits and souls in order to appear properly scientific, while many social theorists today recognise that this language has multiple genealogies and that we need not dispense with it entirely. 'Spirit' may call to mind Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and other works in the phenomenological tradition. For the period in which Simmel composed this essay, however, scholars now recognise the crucial influence of *Völkerpsychologie* on Simmel (Kusch, 2019). As a tradition of psychological thought distinct from both descriptive and experimental psychology, it developed a wider view of culture and cognition under the heading of *Geist* than the schools of psychology that rose to dominance later in the twentieth century (Damböck et al., 2020).[6] Under this aspect, scholars can revisit Simmel's urban theory, and his social thought more generally, with a keener sense for his vision. For that purpose, I have also opted for a more faithful translation of this essay's title rather than the established English title, 'The metropolis and mental life'.

Simmel often uses multiple metaphors and other devices to convey his meaning, to the point where literal translation, while possible, would make the text needlessly opaque. I attempted, as much as possible, 'to present a Simmel whose language has come of age in the present and for the future' (Scaff, 2011: 3). I have also taken care to use more inclusive language. For instance, unlike both previous translations, I strove for more gender-neutral language, which is closer to Simmel's text – and his intentions – than the heavily male language of Shils, Gerth and Mills.

The metropolis and the life of spirit

The most deep-seated problems of modern life stem from the individual's aspiration to defend the autonomy and individuality of his or her existence against overpowering social forces, the historical heritage, the external culture, and the technique of life. This is the latest stage in the struggle with nature that humankind had to wage in prehistoric times to ensure its *bodily* existence. The eighteenth century called for the liberation from all historical ties to the state, religion, morality or the economy, so that the unspoiled human nature common to all may develop freely. The nineteenth century supplemented this basic idea of liberty with the insistence on the particularity of the person and his or her activities within the division of labour. This would render the individual at once incomparable and irreplaceable, and, at the same time, reliant on others. Nietzsche found the condition for the full development of the individual in the most ruthless struggle against others, while socialism found it in the diminution of all competition. Yet the same basic theme underlies these conceptions: the resistance of the subject to being levelled and consumed within a social-technological mechanism. Any inquiry into modern life's characteristic products – or, to put it another way, any inspection of the body of culture as regards its soul – will have to pay attention to how these formations reconcile individual and supraindividual contents of life, the adaptations of the personality through which it comes to terms with outside forces. This is my task today as I take up the subject of the metropolis.

The psychological basis of the metropolitan type of individuality is the *intensification of nervous stimulation*, brought on by the rapid and constant change of external and internal sensations. Humans are creatures of difference; their consciousness is stimulated by the difference between the current sensation and the ones preceding it. Lasting sensations, slight differences and their succession according to the regularity of habit require less consciousness than the rapid succession of changing images, the gruff distance of what one perceives at a single glance, or the unexpected nature of impressions that impose themselves. In producing these psychological conditions in every crossing of the street and in the tempo and multiplicity of its economic, occupational and social life, the metropolis creates a strong contrast to small-town and country life with its slower, more habitual, more regular rhythm in the very sensory foundation of the life of our souls, due to the far larger segment of our consciousness it occupies given our constitution as creatures of difference. This accounts for the intellectualised character of metropolitan life as opposed to small-town life. In small towns, life is founded upon relationships of disposition and emotion that have their root in the more unconscious strata of the soul and are more likely to grow out of the quiet regularity of uninterrupted habits. The place of the intellect, on the other hand, is in the transparent and conscious higher strata of our soul. It is the most adaptable of our inner capacities; unlike our conservative disposition, it need not first be shaken and undermined to come to terms with changing and contradictory images. Thus, the metropolitan type of individuality – which naturally varies in a thousand individual ways – creates for itself a protective organ against the uprootedness looming in every disturbance and discrepancy of its outside milieu. Instead of reacting according to her disposition, the typical metropolitan person relies primarily on her intellect, to which the intensification of consciousness – brought about by the same causes – has already granted the prerogative. As a result, the reaction to these kinds of images has been bestowed upon the least sensitive mental organ at the greatest distance from the depths of the personality. This intellectuality, which we have recognised as a defence of subjective life against the assault of the metropolis, becomes entangled with numerous other phenomena.

The metropolis has always been the locus of the money economy. The multiplicity and density of economic activity elevate the importance of money as a means of exchange to a level it could never attain in the sparse trade in goods in rural areas. The money economy and the domination of the intellect are deeply connected. Both share matter-of-factness in their treatment of people and goods, in which formal justice is often paired with unyielding hardness. The purely intellectual person is oblivious to all genuine individuality, because it gives rise to relations and reactions that cannot be exhausted by the logical intellect alone, just as the principle of money is that it erases the individuality of the appearance. Money is only concerned with what individualities share in common, namely exchange value, which reduces all qualities and particularities to mere quantity. Intimate relationships of disposition between people are founded upon their individuality, whereas relationships of the intellect treat humans like numbers in a calculation – that is, as elements that are essentially oblivious, that are only of interest with regard to the objective weight they carry. Similarly, the big-city dweller treats suppliers, customers, messengers and others he or she is forced into contact with in a calculating manner. By contrast, in small-group relationships, due to the unavoidable acquaintance with

individualities, behaviour is inflected by disposition, creating a world beyond mere give and take. The essential difference in the psychology of economic exchange is that, under premodern conditions, commodities were produced for the customer that ordered them, so producers and consumers were mutually acquainted, whereas in the modern metropolis, production almost always occurs for the market, that is, for consumers who never come face-to-face with the producer. As a result, the interests of both parties become mercilessly dispassionate; their calculating economic egotism is not troubled by elusive personal relationships. This development in human relationships is so closely interrelated with the money economy – which reigns in the metropolis and has displaced the last remnants of production for immediate exchange and daily reduces work on order – that nobody can say whether the intellectualised mentality inexorably pushed towards a money economy, or whether money brought about the intellectualised mentality. It is clear, however, that the metropolitan form of life provides fertile ground for this interaction. By way of supporting evidence, I will cite only a saying by the most distinguished English constitutional historian: Over the whole course of English history, London has never been England's heart, but often England's head, and always her money bag!

One seemingly meaningless trait on the surface of life can reveal an underlying current running through the soul. The modern spirit has become more and more calculating. The ideal of the natural sciences to turn the world into an arithmetic problem, to codify each of its parts in an equation, corresponds to the calculating exactitude money gives to practical life; it alone has filled the days of so many with measuring, calculating, numerical coding and the reduction of qualitative values to quantitative ones. Money, by its calculating character, has introduced precision into the relationship between the elements of life, dependability into the determination of equivalencies, and clarity into appointments and agreements (as is apparent in the spread of pocket watches). However, metropolitan conditions are at once cause and effect of this character trait. Thus, the relationships and business of the typical big-city dweller tend to be varied and complicated, especially since the concentration of many people with differentiated interests results in a complex organism that would collapse into utter chaos without exact punctuality in promises and deliveries. If all clocks in Berlin started telling the wrong time, even within a one-hour window, the city's entire life of exchange, economic and otherwise, would be in lasting disarray. This is exacerbated by the seemingly irrelevant factor of great distances, which turn any delay into an unaffordable expenditure of time. The technique of metropolitan life is unimaginable without the punctilious ordering of all activities and interactions in a fixed, intersubjective temporal schema. Once again, this brings to the fore my main point: Even the seemingly most superficial aspect of human existence bears heavily on the depths of the soul, and all banal external appearances are connected, as by a vector of force, to the final decisions regarding the meaning and style of life. Metropolitan life may impose punctuality, calculability and exactitude upon life on account of its complications and expansiveness, but these characteristics are not only connected to the money economy and its intellectualistic cast, but they necessarily also give their hue to the contents of life, crowding out the irrational, instinctive, sovereign impulses and personality traits that seek to determine the form of life rather than accept an externally imposed, general schema. Although this type of sovereign personality is by no means impossible in the urban context, it runs counter to its dominant type. This explains the passionate

disdain for the metropolis shown by observers like Ruskin and Nietzsche; they only find value in the nonschematic and unique that cannot be stated with even precision for all. The source of their disdain for the metropolis also feeds their disdain for the money economy and the intellectualised existence.

The same factors that ossified exactitude and precision into a highly depersonalised formation also facilitated the emergence of a highly personalised one. Perhaps no other psychological phenomenon is as unique to the metropolis as the blasé attitude. In the first instance, the blasé attitude is a result of the rapidly changing and contradictory stimuli alluded to above as the source of the increased intellectuality in the metropolis. Hence, slow-witted people tend not to be blasé. In the same manner in which a life of unrestrained pleasure gives rise to the blasé attitude because it constantly evokes strong reactions from the nerves until they no longer respond to stimuli, weaker stimuli can evoke violent responses through rapid and contradiction-laden change. Torn brutally back and forth, the nerves exhaust their last reserves and, being caught up in the same milieu, they are unable to rejuvenate. The resulting inability to respond to new stimuli with adequate intensity is the blasé attitude that we encounter even in children raised in the metropolis when compared to their counterparts in quieter, less varied milieux.

This physiological source of the metropolitan blasé attitude combines with another, which flows out of the money economy. The blasé attitude is characterised by a dulled sensibility for the differences between things – not in the sense that they are not perceived at all, as a dull-witted person might fail to do, but in the sense that the significance and value of the differences between things (and, by extension, the things themselves) are taken to be without consequence. To the blasé person, all things appear matted with a grey hue; none is preferable to the other. This mood of the soul is the true subjective reflection of a money economy that has fully permeated social relations. Money, having rendered the multiplicity of things equivalent, having translated all qualitative differences into a question of 'how much?', having established itself in all its colourlessness and indifference as the universal denominator of value, has become the most dreadful leveller. In place of specificity, unique value and peerlessness, it leaves a hollow core. All things swim in an endlessly flowing stream of money, each having the same weight. They lie in the same plane, different only in terms of the area they cover. In some cases, the colouration – or, much rather, discolouration – of things through their equivalence with money may be imperceptible; however, the attitude that the rich adopt towards objects that can be purchased for money, and perhaps even the cast given to these objects by the wider public, cannot escape notice. This is another reason why the metropolis, as the main seat of the money economy where the purchasability of things pervades, is the chief locus of the blasé attitude. Here, the concentration of people and things stimulating the nerves is at its peak, driving the individual's nerves to their highest performance. However, the quantitative intensification of the same conditions results in a reversal, the slackening of the nerves, causing this singularly adaptive phenomenon of the blasé attitude. The sole remaining possibility for the nerves to handle the contents and forms of the metropolis is to eschew any kind of reaction. The survival of those affected by the blasé attitude comes at the cost of devaluing the objective world in its entirety. As a result, their personalities are likewise devalued.

The subject must reconcile to this form of existence on his or her own, but survival in the metropolis demands a similarly negative form of behaviour in society as well. In formal terms, we can characterise the spiritual attitude of big-city dwellers towards one another as aloof. If the continuous contact with countless people were to result in as many internal responses as in a small town, whose inhabitants are almost all acquainted and in positive relationships with one another, one would be completely atomised on the inside and one's soul would end up in an unimaginable state. This psychological fact, paired with justifiable mistrust of people fleetingly encountered in metropolitan life, forces us to be aloof. This accounts for why we often fail to recognise neighbours, even after they have lived next door for years, and why small-town dwellers perceive us as cold-hearted. Indeed, if I am not mistaken, the inner side of this aloof stance is not merely oblivion, but also an often unconscious, quiet aversion, a mutual strangeness and repulsion, which could explode into hatred and struggle in the moment of an uncalled-for close touch. The entire internal organisation of such an expansive life of exchange rests on a manifold hierarchical structure of sympathies, oblivions and aversions both short and longstanding. The sphere of oblivion is not as big as it appears to be on its surface, since our souls respond to almost every sensation emanating from another human being with a certain feeling, only seemingly cancelled out into indifference due to its unconscious, fleeting and fickle nature. In fact, indifference would be as unnatural to us as a blur of random mutual suggestions would be unbearable, and what protects us from these two typical dangers of the metropolis is antipathy – the latent and preliminary state of practical antagonism. Antipathy enables the distances and distancings without which this manner of life could not be lived. Its metrics and mixtures, the rhythm of its emergence and disappearance, the forms in which we accommodate it – all this, along with the more strictly speaking homogenising factors, constitutes the cohesive whole of the metropolitan way of life. What appears as directly dissociating turns out to be one of the metropolis's elementary forms of socialisation.

Further, aloofness with its overtones of hidden aversion appears only as a form or guise of a much more general characteristic of the metropolitan spirit. This attitude grants a kind and degree of personal liberty that is without analogy in different conditions. As such, it refers back to one of the great developmental tendencies of social life as a whole – one of the few for which a consistent formula can be found. Social formations both in historical and contemporary times go through the same initial phase. As relatively small groups with strong closure against neighbouring groups perceived as strange or antagonistic, they start out with a high level of inner cohesion, granting individual members only minimal space to develop their own qualities and take responsibility for their own free movement. Political groups and kinship groups, parties and religious associations all begin like this. The survival of very young groups depends on the strict drawing of boundaries and centripetal unity, so they cannot grant individuals any special latitude for their free internal or external development. Social evolution continues in two divergent yet corresponding directions from this phase. As the group grows – numerically, spatially, in relevance and in purpose – its immediate internal unity declines proportionally, and its boundaries grow less pronounced due to interactions and intergroup connections. At the same time, the individual gains latitude of movement that reaches far beyond the initial jealous constraints. The division of labour necessitated in the enlarged

group makes the development of a unique manner possible. Countless groups have developed in accordance with this formula, including the state, Christendom, guilds and political parties – though it goes without saying that the particular conditions and forces of individual groups inflect the general scheme in various ways. I think we can clearly discern this formula in the development of individuality in urban life. The small-town life of antiquity and the Middle Ages imposed external constraints on the movement and relationships of individuals and internal constraints on their autonomy and differentiation, such as would make life unbearable for the modern individual. Even today the big-city dweller senses a similar constriction when transplanted to a small town. The smaller the group that constitutes our milieu, the more limited our capacity to form relationships that cross group boundaries, the more vigilant the group with regard to the activities, conduct and convictions of each member, the more likely a qualitative or quantitative deviation would break the mould.

According to this schema, the *polis* of antiquity appears to have had all the characteristics of a small town. As a consequence of the continuous menace of its enemies both near and far threatening its very existence, the *polis* featured rigid political and military unity and the mutual surveillance of citizens. The collective was jealous of the individual, whose life apart from the group was diminished to the point where it could only be expressed through a domestic despotism. The enormous agility and unique colourfulness of Athenian life may have resulted from the circumstance that a people composed of uniquely individualistic personalities found itself in constant struggle with the inside and outside pressures exerted by small-town life. In the tense atmosphere resulting from this struggle, the weak were kept in a downtrodden state and the strong were encouraged to assert themselves passionately. Because of this, Athens saw something come to fruition that may roughly be called the 'general humanity' in our species' spiritual development. The most encompassing and most general contents and forms of life are intimately connected to the most individualised; the formal and historical validity of this relationship is what is at stake here. Both stem from – and at the same time can be threatened by – tightly formed groups, whose survival is contingent on their ability to ward off the general threat from outside and the free movement of individuals within. In feudal times, the 'free' man was a man subject to the law of the land, that is, the law of the largest social group; while the unfree man, having been banned from the larger social group, only derived rights from the small group within the feudal association. Likewise, in today's intellectually refined sense, the metropolitan individual is 'free' in contrast to the pettiness and prejudice that confine the small-town dweller. The autonomy allowed for by mutual aloofness and indifference as spiritual conditions of life in large groups is nowhere felt more strongly than in the thick jungle of the metropolis. The physical proximity of bodies makes the spiritual distance all the more apparent. Clearly the price of this liberty is that one seldom feels as lonely and abandoned as in that selfsame metropolitan jungle. As elsewhere, the freedom of the big city is no guarantee of the individual's emotional wellbeing.

The metropolis is the locus of internal and external liberty, not just because of the world-historical correlation between increasing group size and increased liberty, but also because, on a larger scale, the metropolis has also been the locus of cosmopolitanism. In a similar manner in which wealth accumulates – at a certain level it increases ever more quickly and seemingly all on its own – the number of face-to-face acquaintances and of

economic, personal and intellectual linkages rises exponentially once a certain threshold has been reached. Each dynamic expansion is followed by even greater expansion; each thread that is spun virtually singlehandedly spawns further threads – much in the way that the unearned increment[7] of the ground rent yields more and more to the proprietor simply because of increasing commerce. At this point quantity of life translates into qualitative character traits. A small town's sphere of life is usually fully self-contained, while metropolitan life crucially moves outwards in waves across a wide-ranging national and international surface. Weimar is no exception, because its far-flung relevance was tied to certain people and died along with them, whereas the metropolis does not depend even on its most distinguished denizens for its relevance. This is the price of – and the antithesis of – the autonomy enjoyed by the individual in the metropolis. The functional weight of the metropolis beyond its physical boundaries is its most momentous characteristic, endowing its life with gravity, relevancy and responsibility. Much like a person is not fully contained within his or her body or the immediate realm upon which it acts, but in the sum total of the effects extending outwards in space and time, a city also is composed of the totality of effects extending further than its immediate existence. This is the true circumference, wherein its being expresses itself. This indicates that individual liberty, which logically and historically goes along with such expansiveness, must not be understood only in negative terms as mere freedom of movement and elimination of prejudices and philistinism. Its defining mark is that it allows the uniqueness and peerlessness of every personality to find expression. Liberty means to follow one's own natural inclination, and this only truly becomes apparent to us and others when the expression of these natural inclinations differs from others'. It only becomes clear that our manner of existence has not been coerced upon us when we cannot be mistaken for another.

Cities have the greatest division of labour; they produce extreme phenomena such as the profitable occupation of the *quatorzièmes* in Paris. These people, who advertise their services with signs outside their apartments, keep themselves available at dinnertime every night wearing proper dinner attire so that they can be called upon should a dinner party of thirteen find itself around a table. The conditions of the division of labour increase proportionally with the expansion of the city. These conditions consist of a large group, receptive of a wide array of goods and services, but also, by creating a concentration of people and thus a struggle for consumers, forcing the individual to specialise so as not to be easily replaceable by another. The crucial thing is that city life has transformed the struggle with nature for food into the struggle for people. The stakes in this struggle are not products of nature, but human products. At the bottom of this is not just the matter of specialisation, but something more profound: the provider of goods and services must create ever new and ever more idiosyncratic needs in potential customers. The imperative to specialise and find one's niche by fulfilling a function that is difficult to replace provides a thrust towards differentiation, sophistication and enrichment of the public's needs, which necessarily result in growing personal differences within the public.

At this point, the city provides the impetus for the transition to a more narrowly understood spiritual individualisation of characteristics of the soul in proportion to its size. A number of causes are readily apparent. First, there is the difficulty of bringing one's personality to fruition in the dimensions of metropolitan life. As the significance and energy grow above a threshold in quantitative terms, qualitative differentiation

provides a means to get the attention of one's social group by stimulating its sensitivity for differences. This gives an allure to the most tendentious and whimsical forms of behaviour that are specifically metropolitan extravaganzas of setting oneself apart, such as capriciousness and preciousness, whose meaning lies less in their content than in the form of being different and noticeable. For many, this is the only way to secure some level of self-esteem and the consciousness of having a place, albeit via the circuitous route of other people's consciousness. Another inconspicuous feature of urban life is also at work, namely the brevity and rarity of the encounters between individuals when contrasted with small-town social intercourse. Because of this, the temptation is far higher to appear 'to the point', while frequent and lengthy meetings give an unambiguous impression of the personality of one's interlocutor.

The basic foundation underlying the drive towards an individualised private existence in the metropolis – setting aside for now the question of whether this is justified or even successful – appears to me to be the following. Modern cultural development is characterised by a preponderance of what might be called objective spirit over subjective spirit. In language and in law, in production technology and in art, in science as much as in the domestic sphere, we find embodied a daily-increasing quantity of spirit behind which subjects lag in their spiritual development. When we survey the enormous culture that has built up over the last one hundred years in things, in fields of knowledge, in institutions and amenities, and compare it to the cultural advances of the individual during the same time span – even in just the upper strata – we notice a shocking difference in the rate of growth between the two, and in some cases even a regress in the culture of individuals with regard to intellect, tenderness and idealism. This discrepancy is in large parts thanks to the division of labour, because it demands increasingly more one-sided activities from the individual and, at its highest point, it often lets the individual's personality as a whole deteriorate. The individual is less and less able to measure up to an encroaching objective culture. Not so much consciously, but in the realm of action and the general gloomy mood, the individual has been reduced to a negligible quantity, a speck of dust opposite a vast organisation of things and forces that gradually rids him or her of all advances, intellectual pursuits and values and transfers them over from the form of subjective to the form of objective life. We need only to hint at the fact that the metropolis is the arena in which this culture, which overbears anything personal, plays out. The metropolis holds such an overwhelming quantity of crystallised, depersonalised spirit in store in its buildings, its educational institutions, its wondrous transport amenities, its formations of social life and its visible state institutions, that the personality is unable to hold its ground. On the one hand, life is made exceedingly easy for the individual, to whom the city offers ample stimulation, interests and things to fill one's time and consciousness, thus providing a current keeping everyone afloat. On the other hand, however, life becomes increasingly composed of these impersonal contents and representations that seek to crowd out all uniquely personal colourations. Consequently, for the uniquely personal element to survive, the individual must put on display an extreme idiosyncrasy and individuality. One must exaggerate the personal element for it to remain audible even to oneself. The atrophy of individual culture through the hypertrophy of objective culture is one of the reasons for the high priests of individualism's fierce hatred of the metropolis, Nietzsche foremost among them. It is also a reason why they are so

passionately loved in the metropolis and appear as prophets and redeemers of big-city dwellers' unsatisfied yearnings.

As we inquire into the historical significance of these two forms of individualism nourished by the quantitative conditions of the metropolis – individual autonomy and the formation of the uniquely personal element – the metropolis gains an entirely new worth in the world history of spirit. The eighteenth century saw the individual violently subjugated in political, agrarian, guild and church relations that had ceased to be meaningful, imposing upon people an artificial form and inequalities that were no longer justifiable. In this situation, the call for liberty and equality emerged: the belief in the individual's freedom of movement, regardless of social or spiritual condition, that would bring to the fore the noble core with which we are all by nature endowed and which history alone has thwarted. In the nineteenth century, there arose another ideal alongside this liberal ideal, aided by Goethe and romanticism on the one hand, and the economic division of labour on the other. Now individuals, having been liberated from their historical yoke, wanted also to differ from one another. The individual's worth no longer lies in his or her 'universal humanity', but in his or her incommensurable qualities and peerlessness. The conflicts and mutual entanglements between these two manners of determining the subject's role in society constitute the external and internal history of the present. The metropolis functions as an arena for these two to clash and attempt to reach an agreement, because its peculiar conditions have proved to be an opportunity and an impetus for the development of both. Thus, it attains a distinguished position in the development of the soul's existence. The metropolis turns out to be one of the greatest historical formations in which the contradictory flows that encompass life mingle in equal parts and co-evolve. As such, we are in no position to proclaim judgements, although individual phenomena associated with the metropolis may strike us sympathetically or apathetically. These powers are grown into both the root and the crown of historical life in its entirety, in which we only have the fleeting existence of a single cell. Our task is neither to condemn nor to pardon, but only to understand.[8]

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Phil Kasinitz, Stanley Aronowitz, Lawrence Scaff, Jen Jack Gieseking, Bryan Turner, Anouk de Koning and Hebe Verrest for their help and encouragement along the way, and to Jennifer Fröhlich for her sure-handed language editing. The five anonymous *JCS* reviewers were exceptionally constructive, and I am grateful for their careful reading of both the translation itself and my introductory essay.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

John D Boy https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2118-4702

Notes

1. Howard Woodhead, a student of Albion Small whom Don Levine (1993) once characterised as 'an American correspondent on Simmel', reported on the Exposition itself in four parts (*AJS*, vol. 9, nos. 4–6; vol. 10, no. 1) for a total of 89 pages, and also wrote a separate review of the volumes coming out of the Exposition edited by Robert Wuttke (*AJS*, vol. 10, no. 5). The Exposition was also covered in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (Marsh, 1904).
2. Weber's essay first appeared in 1921 in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, before being included in his posthumous *Economy and Society* as a section on 'non-legitimate domination'. The English translation also lagged behind that of Simmel's essay by several years.
3. The third edition (Park and Burgess, 1921) contains eight selections from Simmel. Only Robert Park is represented more, with thirteen entries. Nobody else even comes close: Small appears four times, as does Charles Darwin. Spencer and Durkheim appear only twice each.
4. Gary D. Jaworski's (1997) *Georg Simmel and the American Prospect*, a book-length study on the American reception of Simmel by the Chicago School and the émigrés at what would become the New School for Social Research, hardly mentions the urban themes from Simmel's work, since those didn't start playing a bigger role until the late 1930s. Woolston (1912) is an early exception.
5. To appreciate the contrast between this reading of Simmel and his initial reception by the Chicago School, consider that in Andrew Abbott's (1997) analysis, variables thinking runs counter to the Chicago School's programme of understanding urban life as an 'interactional field'.
6. I owe these references to an anonymous reviewer.
7. 'Unearned increment' appears in English in the original (trans.).
8. This talk by its nature cannot be traced back to any citable references. Its main ideas on cultural history are stated more elaborately in my *The Philosophy of Money* (1978).

References

Abbott A (1997) Of time and space: The contemporary relevance of the Chicago school. *Social Forces* 75(4): 1149–1182. DOI: 10.1093/sf/75.4.1149.

Abbott A (2017) *Department and Discipline: Chicago Sociology at One Hundred*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Abu-Lughod J (1961) Migrant adjustment to city life: The Egyptian case. *American Journal of Sociology* 67(1): 22–32. DOI: 10.1086/223047.

Aronowitz S (1994) The Simmel revival: A challenge to American social science. *The Sociological Quarterly* 35(3): 397–414. DOI: 10.1111/j.1533-8525.1994.tb01735.x.

Choldin HM (1978) Urban density and pathology. *Annual Review of Sociology* 4(1): 91–113. DOI: 10.1146/annurev.so.04.080178.000515.

Damböck C, Feest U and Kusch M (2020) Descriptive psychology and *Völkerpsychologie*—in the contexts of historicism, relativism, and naturalism. *HOPOS: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science* 10(1): 226–233. DOI: 10.1086/707919.

Davis MS (1971) That's interesting! *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 1(2): 309–344. DOI: 10.1177/004839317100100211.

Fischer CS (1976) *The Urban Experience*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Freestone R and Amati M (eds) (2014) *Exhibitions and the Development of Modern Planning Culture*. London; New York, NY: Routledge.

Frisby D (1985) *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Frisby D (1992) *Simmel and Since: Essays on Georg Simmel's Social Theory*. London: Routledge.

Jaworski GD (1997) *Georg Simmel and the American Prospect*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
Jazbinsek D (2003) The metropolis and the mental life of Georg Simmel. *Journal of Urban History* 30(1): 102–125. DOI: 10.1177/0096144203258342.
Kusch M (2019) From *Völkerpsychologie* to the sociology of knowledge. *HOPOS: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science* 9(2): 250–274. DOI: 10.1086/704105.
Lefebvre H (2003) *Urban Revolution*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
Levine DN (1993) Howard Woodhead: An American correspondent on Simmel. *Simmel Newsletter* 3(1): 74–77.
Levine DN, Carter EB and Gorman EM (1976a) Simmel's influence on American sociology. I. *American Journal of Sociology* 81(4): 813–845. DOI: 10.1086/226143.
Levine DN, Carter EB and Gorman EM (1976b) Simmel's influence on American sociology. II. *American Journal of Sociology* 81(5): 1112–1132. DOI: 10.1086/226187.
Liebeschütz H (1970) *Von Georg Simmel zu Franz Rosenzweig: Studien zum Jüdischen Denken im deutschen Kulturbereich*. Tübingen: Mohr.
Manheim E (1960) Theoretical prospects of urban sociology in an urbanized society. *American Journal of Sociology* 66(3): 226–229. DOI: 10.1086/222874.
Marsh BC (1904) The German municipal exposition. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 23: 176–177.
Milgram S (1970) The experience of living in cities. *Science* 167(3924): 1461–1468. DOI: 10.1126/science.167.3924.1461.
Nolte P (1998) Georg Simmels Historische Anthropologie der Moderne: Rekonstruktion eines Forschungsprogramms. *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 24(2): 225–247.
Park RE and Burgess EW (eds) (1921) *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, 3rd ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
Parsons T (1949) *The Structure of Social Action*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
Robinson J (2015) Comparative urbanism: New geographies and cultures of theorizing the urban. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40(1): 187–199. DOI: 10.1111/1468-2427.12273.
Roy A (2009) The 21st-century metropolis: New geographies of theory. *Regional Studies* 43(6): 819–830. DOI: 10.1080/00343400701809665.
Scaff LA (2011) Simmel redux. *Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews* 40(1): 1–4. DOI: 10.1177/0094306110391762.
Sigmund S (1993) Simmel in Berlin. *Berliner Journal für Soziologie* 3(2): 161–181.
Simmel G (1903) Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben. In: Petermann T (ed.) *Die Großstadt: Vorträge und Aufsätze zur Städteausstellung*. Dresden: von Zahn & Jaensch, pp. 187–206.
Simmel G (1978) *The Philosophy of Money*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
Webber MM (1968) The post-city age. *Daedalus* 97(4): 1091–1110. DOI: 10.2307/20013413.
Weber M (1958) *The City*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
Wirth L (1938) Urbanism as a way of life. *American Journal of Sociology* 44(1): 1–24. DOI: 10.1086/217913.
Woolston HB (1912) The urban habit of mind. *American Journal of Sociology* 17(5): 602–614. DOI: 10.1086/212011.

Author biography

John D Boy (PhD, City University of New York) is an assistant professor of sociology in the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology at Leiden University in the Netherlands, where he directs the research cluster on digitalisation. He is writing a book about Instagram with Justus Uitermark.