

**RELATIVISM, VITALISM AND MODERNITY IN
GEORG SIMMEL'S SOCIAL THEORY**

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**Ph.D Thesis
The University of Edinburgh
1994**



D e c l a r a t i o n

The work submitted in this thesis is the result of the candidate's own research except where otherwise indicated. It has not been accepted for any other degree, and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any other degree.

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A B S T R A C T

Current sociological theory seems to be in a state of confusion due to the lack of a substantive paradigmatic framework of explanation. Debates in postmodern discourse seems to undermine the concept of epistemology and the idea of a progressive social science. My interest in classical conceptions of relativism and vitalism stems from what I saw as being problematic interpretations of their premises which discourage the view of these theories as being substantive and methodologically rigorous. These interpretations, in light of their relevance to modern debates, contribute to the marginalization of classical social and sociological theory.

My particular focus is based around epistemological and cultural issues in the social theory of Georg Simmel and his contemporaries and their relation to wider aspects of European thought. I have looked at Simmel's underlying ideas in epistemology, such as relativism and vitalism and I have tried to demonstrate their interrelated nature and show their significance for current issues in the epistemology of social science. Thus, I examine the precise relationship between notions of power and utility and I address dominant and established themes in Simmel's theory, such as formal sociology and historicism through the perspective of relativism and vitalism. Both theoretic approaches serve as methodological tools for a new synthetic interpretation of Simmel's sociology that attempts to unify epistemology and the sociology of culture with the aim of providing a better understanding of modern society. Additionally, among the contributions to European thought that I regard as particularly significant for a proper understanding of relativistic and vitalistic epistemology are Nietzsche's nihilism, Dilthey's historical hermeneutics, Bergson's intuitionism and Spengler's critique of modernity. In this way my basic conclusion is that relativism and vitalism are not associated exclusively with the dissolution of all criteria of knowledge ; instead certain versions, such as Simmel's, point to an awareness of these problems but also to an attempt to transcend them. In this respect, these epistemological approaches are directly relevant to current debates in the sociology of culture, and crucial to theories of modernity and postmodernity.

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

There is a number of people who have contributed directly or indirectly to the realization of this study. Two of my teachers during my undergraduate years at Deree College ought to be mentioned here. Tina Katsarou and Georgia Lagoumitzi have cultivated through the quality of their teaching my enthusiasm for sociological theory and have encouraged my interest in Simmel.

Several people in the Department of Sociology at the University of Edinburgh have provided useful advice and insightful comments, crucial to the development of my work. In particular, I would like to thank my primary supervisor, Prof. John Orr for the interest he has shown and the guidance he has given me throughout the period of this study. My second supervisor, Dr. David Bloor has also contributed substantially to the articulation of my ideas. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge the contributions of Prof. Barry Barnes and Dr. Stanley Raffel during the first stages of this study. Two dear friends and academics have helped me in clarifying my thinking in a scholarly way. Dr. Wendy Bottero, in particular, has provided forceful arguments for and against my position, while the several discussions I had with Prof. Masahiro Hamashita have helped me to crystallize key aspects of my argument.

I would also like to thank the Vans Dunlop Institute for awarding me a scholarship for part of this research and I am also indebted to Martha Robinson for a draft translation of Simmel's essay, "Henri Bergson" which she has provided me.

During my stay in Edinburgh there have been several people whose encouragement and support has given me the will to continue. In this respect I am grateful to my friends, Vassilis Angouras, Yiannis Karagiorgos, Prodromos Sarigiannis, Stamatis Spirou and Angie Voela.

The support of my friends in Greece - mostly from Ioannina - has also been vitally important. Vassilis Anastasiou, Vangelis Argyris and Leonidas Kokoves although far away have constantly been a source of strength.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my parents, Nicholas and Maria and to my brother Yiannis, for the love and support they have given me. Without them this study would not have been realised and it is to them that I dedicate it.

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We stand on the last promontory of the centuries!... Why should we look back, when what we want is to break down the mysterious doors of the Impossible? Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed.

- F.T. Marinetti, *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism*

The capacity of the living form to take in, refine and assimilate, without becoming unsure in the process, is a test for its strength. But as soon as this form of life becomes anything but self-evident, or even takes notice of critics who dispute the need for its existence, it is all up with it. For then one loses sight of the necessity of a structure that assigns to every sort of person and human activity their place in the life of the whole - the realization of the essential unlikeness, *inequality*, of the parts that is identical with organic formation.

- Oswald Spengler, *The Hour of Decision*

There corresponds with and originates in the many-sidedness of our being and the one-sidedness of any conceptual expression regarding our relation to things the fact that no such expression is universally and permanently satisfactory, but is usually complemented historically by an opposite assertion. This produces, in many instances, an undetermined wavering, a contradictory mixture, or a disinclination to adopt any comprehensive principles. If the constitutive assertions that aim to establish the essence of things are changed into heuristic assertions that seek to determine our methods of attaining knowledge by formulating ideal ends, this makes possible the simultaneous validity of opposing principles. If their significance is only methodological, they may be used alternatively without contradiction...

- Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*

Introduction

I. The Problem, Aims and Objectives

This study grew out of my reflection on the investigation of debates in classical, modern and postmodern sociological theory. The core of what I saw as being worth to revisit in contemporary theoretic schemes was the misappropriation of the whole tradition of European thought at the turn of the century and particularly its reactionary manifestation it received in Germany. The post-Nietzschean *Kulturkritik* of that period and up to the thought of Heidegger, has been regarded as pessimistic, conservative and occasionally proto-fascist. Although much of this is undoubtedly true, the general idea of that period for contemporary sociology has been rather negative in its colouring. My aim is to show how within this rather stigmatized framework, there are theoretic approaches, namely relativism and vitalism, which encourage rather than discourage the construction of a sociological discourse suitable to the needs and nature of our times. The epistemology of Georg Simmel, and the thought of some of his contemporaries (Dilthey, Bergson, Spengler) seems to me to be appropriate for this purpose.

This thesis operates at several levels. On the main level it attempts to unify epistemology and cultural critique in order to offer a synthetic framework of explanation for contemporary sociology. For example, at the purely epistemological aspect of my argument I use relativism and vitalism in order to firstly, demonstrate their intrinsic relationship as methodological procedures, and secondly, to use both doctrines as adequate theoretical approaches for sociology. At another level, which mainly involves the demonstration of the synthetic approach I intend to elucidate, the argument proceeds comparatively and evolutionary. The comparative aspect refers to the main juxtaposition of Simmel's theory to the thought of Dilthey, Bergson, and Spengler and to a lesser extent to that of Nietzsche, Vaihinger and Mannheim. It attempts not only to illuminate theoretical affinities between Simmel and those thinkers which have been previously unexplored, but also to present the evolutionary course of the synthetic transformation of epistemology (relativism and vitalism) to a theory of culture (critique of culture and civilization). Finally, and at a subordinate level of analysis, I place these arguments within the context of postmodern discourse, albeit marginally. Of course, this study does not present itself as a definitive and comprehensive treatment of Simmel's thought. It only tries to complement previous interpretations of his work and possibly to offer a global and bird's eye view of the problems Simmel sought to explain.

The "Introduction", apart from setting the socio-cultural parameters for the unfolding of the argument, also serves the purpose of a literature overview of the main commentators of Simmel's work. Naturally such an overview cannot fully exhaust all aspects of such a vast area of thought and of such a prolific mind as Simmel's. It simply offers the instrumental framework of analysis for the contextualization of our argument. I hope that what appears as a complex and somewhat ambitious project, will acquire clearer expression and form as the argument progresses throughout the next chapters.

II. General Cultural Framework

Since the early and middle periods of the nineteenth century, European thought entered a phase characterized, not only by a profound intellectual reflection, but also by a severe crisis in terms of the social impact of a rapid, and perhaps not properly digested, evolution of ideas. These two parameters of development and conflict are to be attributed to several factors. Regarding the blossoming character of that period (1830-1933) in the history of ideas, we are confronted with four major trends all of which overlapped with one another. Firstly, philosophers sought to escape from the rigid boundaries of German Idealism, especially the philosophical systems of Kant, Fichte and Hegel. One obvious path towards the emancipation of European thought from these philosophical systems was already prepared by the heirs of Hegel's philosophy be they anarchists (Stirner) or materialists (Marx). However, another tradition proved equally rigorous and eager to dissociate itself from Kantian idealism. The neo-Kantian trend, drawing largely on the philosophy of Nietzsche, appropriated some aspects of Kant's thought for the purpose of reformulating the discourse of the philosophy of history. Dilthey, Rickert, Simmel and Weber provided new and diverse interpretations of historiography and most of them aimed at a programmatic approach that would also incorporate wider social issues within an examination of key factors shaping historical knowledge. Such an approach was to be accomplished later with Spengler.

The second framework within which the evolution of ideas played a crucial role was that of the social sciences. Anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists were struggling to establish a paradigmatic framework that would deviate from the archetypal premises of positivism and naturalism. For example, interpretive sociologists and phenomenologists sought to elaborate sociological understanding within an individually centred discourse; as a consequence, and especially in the case of sociology, several major thinkers revealed a strong inclination towards relativism, irrationalism, psychologism and biologism. In other words, the transition from a macrosociological

level of analysis passed through a stage of an extreme individualism and eventually to an analysis of societal relationships in biologicistic and quasi-metaphysical categories. This type of thinking is epitomized by the philosophical movement of vitalism that was generated in France but came to full fruition in Germany where it was later incorporated in a vulgarized form in the theories of Fascism and Nazism.

Thirdly, radical developments in the natural sciences both in biology and physics led to attempts to synthesize them within a more general philosophical and often sociological framework. In biology, the influential Darwinian theory proved a point of departure for several theories both sympathetic and antipathetic to its premises. Additionally, the revolutionary character of modern physics as it was shaped by Einstein's theory of relativity, Heisenberg's quantum-mechanics and Schrödinger's wave-mechanics engaged a significant philosophical interest directed towards these developments. However, the relationship between natural sciences, philosophy and the social sciences was far more complex than that. The rapid reformulation and reevaluation of theoretical paradigms in all camps led as a consequence, to the introduction of reactionary and pessimistic attitudes that sought the legitimacy of philosophy and the social sciences in the natural sciences and vice versa. This process of mutual influence and search for esteem had several ramifications; however the most characteristic form of synthesis culminated with the positions of vitalism and relativism as they were propounded by several thinkers of that period.

Finally, developments in the visual arts and literature during that period bear testimony to the cultural turmoil of the times. In particular, one has to draw attention to the social substructure of two movements as far the visual arts are concerned. Firstly, the spirit of Romanticism was subverted by the dark vision of particular artists (Dix, Grosz, Schlichter, Davringhausen etc.) in a type of Expressionist painting that attempted to portray the social and psychological implications of decadent bourgeois modernity. Secondly, the rapid industrialization and technological supremacy that was pervading Europe was captured by the Cubists and the Futurists. The latter, having been influenced by the philosophies of Nietzsche and Bergson, emphasized the prevalence of speed and movement in the contemporary technological world alongside a vitriolic and iconoclastic attack on bourgeois morality, life-style and art. In literature major writers, especially in Germany (Broch, Mann, Hesse) pointed to the effects of modernity for man's existence in general. Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* epitomizes this intellectual havoc that led as a consequence to modern history's two global conflicts.

Sketches of this period in Germany are provided in the Anglo-American literature by very few scholars. Among these, there are some which highlight the general spirit within which German and European thought in general acquired a reactionary character in

terms of an anti-democratic, anti-scientific and anti-modern spirit. Some of these are essential in to our attempt to locate Simmel's work in the context of European thought at the turn of the century.

The implications of the reaction to Hegel's transcendental system through Goethe and Nietzsche are studied thoroughly by Karl Löwith¹ who described the conditions of the anti-modern spirit that was going to prevail at the beginning of the century. Löwith identifies in the thought of Nietzsche the multi-faceted dissemination of nihilism in Europe. This nihilism subverted the Enlightenment belief in the utility of values as the prerequisites for man's existence. Despite the wide deviations from Hegel's philosophy, those who modified, distorted or simply extended his ideas operated within an explanatory framework that was circumscribed by the crisis of Christianity and its decline as a cultural form. The anarchist sect of the Hegelian legacy, particularly Stirner, as well as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard at the other end of the spectrum proceeded through a critique of religion to a critique of civilization. For what really remains if the possibilities of the dominant paradigm of a culture have all been tried out ? With Nietzsche the answer lies in the absence of a socially constituted alternative. Nietzsche's escape into a psychologistic interpretation of civilization, namely his will-to-power which is in essence the will-to-life, marks the catalytic point for the meaning of modernity which, as Simmel identified later on, was "its psychologism".

This emphasis on the psychological realm as a basis - albeit problematic - for reference and explanation of sociological phenomena brought the notion of "consciousness" to the forefront of the European intellectual world. Of course "consciousness" makes its appearance before that period, especially in Kant's thought. However it is also as a reaction to the Kantian theory of consciousness that most of early twentieth century thought is structured. H. Stuart Hughes² presents a history of ideas in Europe that focuses around the notion of consciousness, the recovery of the unconscious and in a somewhat latent form the transition from the psychologistic to biologicistic explanations of history and society. The impact of Freud's psychology and its relation to the cardinal issue of the *Gemeinschaft - Gesellschaft* polarity (despite Freud's rejection of the antithesis), involved a certain element of mysticism which becomes more emphatic, as Hughes argues, in Bergson's "intuitionism" and Jung's "collective unconscious". In other words, the shift of a philosophically oriented discourse of history and society was moving dramatically towards notions of motion and kinetic energy, issues of memory and time, conceptions of instinct and intuition which despite the diversity of their

¹ Löwith (1965), especially the sections on Nietzsche and pp. 327-389.

² Hughes (1959 : 105-160, 336-432).

formulations, all shared a common element : a reference to a quasi-mystical, dynamic notion. This notion I designate as Life.

"Life" is an idea which has contributed in shaping the intellectual development of the times to a greater extent than is commonly assumed. For Herbert Schnädelbach³ in his excellent portrait of the evolution of ideas in German philosophy since Idealism, Life is one of the main themes that can be used in order to categorize the forms of the philosophical synthesis which encompasses epistemology and cultural critique. Irrespective of Schnädelbach's classification, Marxism and Vitalism⁴ are the two frameworks which have been able to unite forcefully the foundations (either material or organic) of knowledge with the manifestation of this knowledge to the whole gamut of cultural spheres. One may argue that Existentialism has played a prominent role as well. This is only partially true since Existentialism, especially in the versions of Jaspers and Heidegger, stems out of vitalism.⁵ In this and other respects, Schnädelbach's typology establishes with rigour the interconnected nature of most of these philosophical positions and general themes of discourse. He locates the debate around the concepts of History, Science, Understanding, Life, Values and Being. Regarding the concept of Life, Schnädelbach is thoroughly aware of its significance for modern thought, from the early articulations of this idea in Hegel, to its misuse by fascist vitalism and its residual, and often simplified presence in contemporary intellectual and social movements. At this stage a definition of vitalism which I am going to retain - albeit with modifications - throughout this study, comes in a lucid form from Schnädelbach :

[...] as a rule, life-philosophy begins as a philosophy of *consciousness* . [...] the premises of life-philosophical epistemology are constituted in such a way that in the light of them subject and object, consciousness and what it is conscious of, are themselves seen as derivative and grounded in an antecedent whole, which it is possible to ascertain only by means of intuition. Pre- and non-objective lived experience, moods, the neutrality of what is experienced are supposed to precede all objectivity ; analysis, dichotomization, the hiatus between intuition and concept - all are supposed to come about only by means of secondary exposition of the whole, which up until Heidegger was called 'life'. (Schnädelbach 1984: 147)

As with every profound philosophical system, so with vitalism, there have been different directions in which various thinkers have developed its premises. Whether metaphysical,

³ Schnädelbach (1984).

⁴ I use vitalism in the wider sense, also used by Lukács (1980), which covers irrationalism, intuitionism (*élan vital*), life-philosophy (*Lebensphilosophie*) and life-view (*Lebensanschauung*).

⁵ Schnädelbach (1984: 139).

purely organic, pessimistic, optimistic, relativistic, fascist or racist, life-philosophers have attempted to bridge the gap between nature and culture. This they attempt to do not in a mechanical but in a straightforwardly organic way. The path to naturalism or biologism though, is better apprehended if one looks at the more sophisticated and moderate versions of vitalism rather than to extreme popularized versions of it. To reduce a whole world-view to its populist manifestation leads not only to extreme positions but also to contradiction and explanatory failure (the popularization of Marxism attests to this fact as well). This is one of the tasks of my thesis : to demonstrate the relevance of some highly sophisticated vitalist thinkers for our time. Dilthey, Simmel, Bergson and Spengler are among the ones that I regard as particularly significant for this purpose ; the case of Spengler is the most controversial one and as I shall try to demonstrate at a later stage, much of what is said about him is based on misconceptions.

Of these thinkers, Simmel encompasses all of the themes that Schnädelbach acknowledges as central to the debate. Simmel's thought bears a rigorous relativistic structure which incorporates historical understanding, the construction of ethical ideas, hermeneutics and epistemology in a vitalistic existentialism which conceives Being as Becoming. Yet Simmel is scarcely mentioned in Schnädelbach's work. Simmel's case is the more complex of all (a glance at his epistemology as a critique of the dualisms so popular among vitalistic phraseology confirms this fact) and as I shall try to show it safeguards vitalism from evaluations which aim at reducing it to biologism.

Such evaluations are given a far wider exposition by Georg Lukács⁶ who adumbrates a history of vitalism/irrationalism from a polemical Marxist perspective. Lukács reinforces my statement that a theory of modern civilization has been located between Vitalism and Marxism. It is true that Lukács in his late work moved away from Simmel's vitalism which is detectable in some of his early thought. However, despite the fierce tone of the argument, Lukács's exposition - and to a lesser extent, his evaluation - is of rare profundity and insight. The links between neo-Romanticism and the socio-political milieu in Germany are given new impetus through the articulation of the philosophical ideas of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, whom Lukács considers as the founder of modern irrationalism. Simmel has a prominent position in the argument and Lukács attempts to identify the influence of relativism on epistemology with the destruction of truth-criteria, rendering debates about knowledge vulnerable to fascism or racism. The problematic and deficient elements in Lukács's appraisal stem from the fact that vitalist thought was seen as essentially bourgeois, anti-rational and therefore hostile to explanation and consequently to (proletarian) man. Lukács objects to Simmel's elevation

⁶ Lukács (1980).

of bourgeois categories to supra-historical postulates. For him "the unexplained and inexplicable facticity of bourgeois existence as it is here and now acquires the patina of an eternal law of nature or a cultural value enduring for all time"⁷. This tempting criticism of Simmel's thought, as a product of a luxuriant bourgeoisie, is problematic because it reduces explanation to a mere question of class difference. Lukács overlooks here the validity and inner utility of the so-called "bourgeois" categories of experience and culture. There is no timeless element in Simmel's use of categories - we shall see that he historicizes the concept of Life itself - but only categories and forms that meet the actors' needs for a particular time-space period. However, it is still feasible to extract useful ideas from Lukács, especially regarding issues of epistemology rather than of political conduct. I ought to stress here though that Lukács's thought remains entangled within the strict poles of the Vitalism - Marxism opposition. He overlooked crucial ingredients of the former (relationism, covert Marxist elements, acute sociological observations), and this has clearly led to distortions.

It is true that Lukács was writing during the aftermath of WWII and the marks of destructive vitalism were too recent to have been discarded easily. Lukács in his evaluation perhaps fell victim to the circumstances, reminding us of the war-like predilection of certain vitalist thinkers, a feature associated with both World Wars. This embracing of a deep and violent crisis that had characterized German intellectuals for over four decades is fully analyzed by Fritz Ringer.⁸ He follows a more moderate course than Lukács, although one gets some inklings of Lukácsian polemics but in a more impartial form. Ringer is preoccupied with the legacy of Idealist values in the German academic community at the beginning of the century and their implementation for the purposes of politics, education and economics. Within this climate he identifies a schism within the ranks of German intellectuals : one between the extremists and the accommodationalists. In the first camp one finds all those "orthodox" thinkers who stuck firmly to the characteristics of what Karl Mannheim has called "conservatism"⁹. The reverence towards communitarian conceptions of the organic societal whole was accompanied by a climate of suspicion and mistrust toward reforms or concessions to modernity. Ultimately their theoretic premises formed, sometimes unwittingly, the basis for the intellectual articulation of the ideology of National Socialism. On the other hand, the accommodationalists, or those who overcame their melancholic remembrance of the lost *Gemeinschaft*, were demonstrating a restrained openness toward the oncoming structural

⁷ Lukács (1971 : 157)

⁸ Ringer (1969).

⁹ Mannheim (1968 : 165-166)

changes of Western European societies. Tönnies, Troeltsch, Max Weber, Alfred Weber and Simmel among others, within their inevitable critique of a surging capitalism were still able to single out characteristics of the new social structure that were seen as being positive for either the freedom of the individual or for the general operation of new mechanisms in prevalent cultural institutions. Here, it is interesting to note that this latent but nevertheless significant spirit of reform that was at the threshold of the German consciousness owed much to elements inherent in the vitalist tradition. Simmel is a characteristic example. As Ringer has aptly pointed out,

Simmel did see an antithesis between subjective geist, which was always in creative flux, and the products of this geist, which tended to acquire an objective reality, following fixed laws of their own and restricting the freedom of the creator. On the other hand, Simmel also pointed out that conceptualization was unavoidable, so that nothing could be achieved without a continuing interaction between formative creativity and created form. (Ringer 1969: 338)

However, the cultural climate of the times was so overwhelming that any fragments of optimism allowing explanatory progress and elasticity rather than dissolution of criteria, were swept aside by the dogmatism of conservative thought and its popularized idealism. The current implication of this trend - which *had* to be "buried" with the Holocaust - is that along with the destructive elements that contributed to the vulgarization of this set of ideas, the creative elements were marginalized as well. Contemporary scholarship avoids reference to vitalism on political grounds as well as through the quasi-intellectual façade of the relapse to positivism, naturalism or biologism. Such views I hold to be philosophically naive and sociologically biased, especially in light of vitalism's prognostic significance regarding the current stage of modern civilization. They are rather the outcome of the appropriation of vitalism - though on false grounds and under the safe label of *Kulturkritik* - by the dominant "paradigm" in sociology, namely postmodernism.

Other commentators of German social theory of that period aim to look at the implications of what Harry Liebersohn¹⁰ terms the fatal and utopian element in the theories of Tönnies, Weber, Lukács or Simmel. Regarding his appraisal of Simmel, Liebersohn clearly underplays crucial elements of his epistemology (the relativistic epistemology, the postulate of *a priori* etc.), only to limit the discussion to its exclusively social relevance. In fact, Simmel is portrayed as a victim of the tumultuous circumstances of his time ; such an interpretation leaves little room for a timely reflection and utilization of his theories (the same is true for Spengler).

¹⁰ Liebersohn (1988)

The legacy of German social theory since Simmel's death is examined by David Frisby¹¹ who sets up the intellectual conditions for the evolution of the sociology of knowledge. Frisby traces them primarily in the thought of Nietzsche, Marx, Dilthey, Simmel and Weber. The tradition of *lebensphilosophie* (Dilthey, Simmel) plays a prominent role in the development of Scheler's and early Lukács' ideas, and Frisby points also to the impact of relativist assumptions for the sociology of knowledge. However, the use of vitalism tends to have a mere informative character in Frisby's argument.

A peripheral figure within this tradition of the sociology of knowledge is Alfred Weber.¹² His work on the state of European history which is conquered by nihilism is of primary importance for our purposes here. Weber presents an eclectic treatment of key figures for the development of dogma, its loosening and attempt towards its re-establishment. Within the context of European thought and socio-economic life, he identifies the role of Nietzsche's thought as catalytic for the crisis of modern civilization. For Alfred Weber, Nietzsche's

[...] affirmations and denials [...] sprang from the consequences of the spiritual disintegration that occurred in Europe during the Nineteenth Century. They were splinters of the collapse of the world of ideal values, a collapse that found no adequate absolute outside religion. We can say with confidence that the spiritual outcome of secularism with its historicisms and relativisms was bound to be nihilism. (Weber 1947: 137)

Weber's diagnosis is useful in the sense that it also offers the conditions for a transcendence of the social situation we now identify as postmodern. Clearly, the relapse to "realistic substitutes"¹³ operates at the expense of a deeper set of values which Weber sees as being commanded by the particular needs of our time. The crisis of values and the disbelief in the idea of a paradigmatic cultural form stems from failures and lack of utility in the previous dominant form, namely religion rather than in the *idea* of form as such. Therefore, the transcendence of nihilism is posited as a new imperative the precondition of which is

[...] to overcome our old historico-sociological conceptions regarding the possible outward patterns of human life which were rooted in the now obsolete spatial conditions. (Weber 1947: xi)

This relativism which commands the re-structuring of explanatory or even life-categories

¹¹ Frisby (1983)

¹² Weber (1947)

¹³ Ibid., p. 72

is a consequence of the Simmelian vitalism of the kind that I shall try to outline in the following chapters. Weber's scheme is remarkably close to Simmel's in two other respects : firstly, in the sense that realist nihilism is indeed the condition of postmodernity which both thinkers identify as a barrier to be surpassed and secondly, that the means of this overcoming derive from vitalism or according to Weber and Simmel respectively, from the "transcendental quality of *life*"¹⁴ or the "transcendent character of life" (see chapters 4 & 6).

I have outlined so far some sketches of the period within which Simmel's thought evolved. This is essential since my discussion is not limited to his thought only but also covers the work of Dilthey, Bergson and Spengler. I now turn to a brief presentation of certain highly sophisticated treatments of Simmel's thought which cover both his epistemology and theory of culture. Although my interpretation of his work is autonomous, it is often structured according to what I saw as being unexplored areas in the appraisals of the following Simmel commentators.

III. Simmel : Previous and Prevalent Interpretations

During the last three decades the social theory of Georg Simmel experienced a kind of revival which culminated in the appearance of numerous articles, new translations and books on his thought. These took on a wider European character having as their centre German, French and British scholarship that has challenged the still prevalent American interpretations of Simmel. A vehicle for this growing interest or even enthusiasm for his writings is now the discourse of the sociology of culture with its emphasis on debates about modernity and postmodernity.

Much of what is written about Simmel focuses on either his theory of culture or his epistemology. In both fields of study there have been thoughts and reflections on Simmel's aesthetics, gender studies, theory of value, formal sociology and relativism, that have generated new appraisals and evaluations of classical sociology's foremost thinker on modern life. However, it is often the case that focus on one or the other aspect of his thought works at the expense of a more global view of Simmel's theory and its cultural milieu as a whole. Rarely has synthesis been attempted that would place Simmel's purely sociological *oeuvre* on a firm epistemological basis. The interpretation that comes closest to such a view stops either at formal sociology or explores culture with reference to postmodern interpretations of vitalism.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 185

Before I proceed in outlining the motive, relevance and significance of my interpretation of Simmel, I shall have to present studies which occupy a pre-eminent place in Simmelian literature. Furthermore, I do not intend to provide a comprehensive and detailed picture of secondary literature on Simmel, but simply to characterize the framework provided by previous studies and project the conclusions of my own research into it.

The first attempt at delineating Simmel's theory was made by the French scholar Alfred Mamelet (1914). His dissertation focused on what he saw as being the central feature of Simmel's epistemology, namely relativism. The sociological manifestations of philosophical relativism permeate the diverse themes that Simmel examined throughout his intellectual life. Mamelet locates relativism within the vitalistic theory of consciousness and examines, as a preliminary to the articulation of Simmel's relativist epistemology, his diversion from the Kantian theory of forms and *a priori* categories. He emphasizes the heuristic function of the appearance of forms and by recourse to the psychologistic¹⁵ premises in Simmel's theory detects echoes of vitalist philosophy ; these though tend to take the form of Bergsonian evolutionism rather than transcendental *lebensphilosophie*. Mamelet, brilliantly sets up the same relativistic paradigm in order to identify its consequences for the epistemology of history, the methodological grounding of ethical and economic value and the feasibility of social interaction. He stresses the dynamic element in the new type of relativism which Simmel proposes, a relativism closely tied to consciousness and its own evolution. This type of relativism, termed more appropriately, relationism, safeguards methodological progress against its dissolution into useless and trite subjectivism. All these ideas are explored in Mamelet's thesis but are to be given further elaboration here, particularly because of Mamelet's propensity to adopt a form of Bergsonian intuitionism. With reference to the premises of this early study, one should remark that Simmelian relativism is there set on firm grounds ; what remains - and this is the task of my argument - is to fully utilize it and properly exemplify it for the purposes of sociological explanation.

Another characteristic study of Simmel's epistemology is provided by Rudolph Weingartner (1960). His is the most complete elucidation of Simmel's epistemology to date. Simmel's philosophy is dissected according to an analytical framework of explanation which nevertheless does not lose sight of the whole. Weingartner shows great acuteness in his attempt to elucidate the creative (problem-solving activity) and

¹⁵ The reference to psychologism in the Simmelian sense has little relevance to the experimental psychologism of Wundt, for example. According to Mamelet, Simmel proposes a kind of metaphysical psychologism or "panpsychism" (Mamelet 1914 : 164) where the autonomy of psychical contents is dissolved in the meta-psychological unity of life.

cultivating (individual freedom) elements in Simmel's philosophy. The ambiguity in Weingartner's conclusions, however, stems from the fact that he underplays in his analysis the role of Simmel as sociologist rather than philosopher. At this point the function of relativism as to the construction of methodological categories (forms) has become subordinate. Contrary to Mamelet, Weingartner sustains Simmel's philosophical edifice on the basis of life-philosophy. The conceptions of more-life and more-than-life which form the foundation of transcendental vitalism are sharply distinguished from Bergson's evolutionism.¹⁶ The contribution of Weingartner is to suggest that, unlike Bergsonism, Simmel's vitalism is furnished with a socially viable task which, irrespective of its metaphysical generator, but without being inconsistent with it, can yield useful results for sociological understanding and action. Weingartner in appraising Simmel's form-content categories, indicates that

The history of any form is ruled by 'two mutually exclusive themes', the 'systematic' one which seeks to close out and bring to completion a particular form, and 'the progressive drive' of life which demands adjustment to new situations as they arise. The two principles 'pass through cultural history engaging in the most variegated struggles, repressions, and compromises. (Weingartner 1960: 61)

What is meant here is the creative unity of two forming forces. These forces act constructively whenever crisis, failure or exhaustion of a form's utility occurs, threatening a relapse into chaos. Or when these forces provide a certain laxity, elasticity and dynamism that entails progress whenever forms acquire rigid status. This notion is at the heart of Simmel's theory and will be elucidated in various ways. This conception of creative life should not be confused with contradiction, a confusion which may account for Weingartner's scepticism about Simmel's conclusions. It can be seen as contradictory only if : a)the two activities stand in direct opposition to one another and b)the conception of form-building and form-destruction is perceived ahistorically and without reference to specific cultural contexts. Weingartner's notion that for Simmel life is given and "stability and structure are always the *Aufgabe*, the problem to be solved"¹⁷ is only partial and relegates vitalism to a continuously rebellious activity, whereas in essence this activity occurs only in moments of intense crisis - stemming from inner inconsistencies and contradictions - and has as its aim the creation of new forms, namely, the quest for a new

¹⁶ Here Weingartner makes claims similar to the ones articulated in chapter 4 of this study where I compare the thought of the two philosophers. He is correct in separating their idiomatic vitalisms when he holds that "at times Simmel seems to believe himself to be closer to Bergson than he actually is". (Weingartner 1960 : 16-17).

¹⁷ Ibid. : 183-184

order of things.

In the last two decades the work of Simmel has been through a process of reappraisal within the context of current debates in the sociology of culture. This has been primarily due to the work of two scholars : Guy Oakes and David Frisby. Oakes (1977, 1980, 1984) has concentrated initially on expositions of Simmel's epistemology especially in his theory of forms and philosophy of history. Oakes' contribution rests largely on the fact that it removes the methodological rigidity with which Simmel's theory of forms had hitherto been associated. Additionally, by emphasizing the hermeneutic importance of Simmel's epistemology, Oakes eventually reaches a wider framework of analysis which intersects with other cultural spheres such as literature, gender roles or science. The acknowledgement of Simmel's *lebensphilosophie* as having a crucial role in his thought facilitates the passage from epistemology to cultural critique. In this sense, Oakes may be regarded as the first scholar in the Anglo-American world to have integrated the two realms and to have demonstrated their reciprocal relationship. He is indeed closer than anyone else to the synthetic approach which I put forward in the present study, despite the fact that relativism as in Weingartner's interpretation, receives little attention.

The exploration of Simmel's cultural theory is pursued in a further direction by David Frisby (1981,1984,1985,1992) who takes up a general theme addressed by Lukács - Simmel's impressionist mode of investigation - in order to set up Simmel as an aesthetic interpreter of social reality. This aesthetic perception of life is indeed a central component of his sociology and it is corroborated by many of Simmel's *vignettes*, the most striking of which is the uncovering of aesthetic motives behind the articulation of socialist ideology.¹⁸ Frisby centers his discussion on these grounds. The main category in Frisby's rationale is Simmel's distanced perception of social phenomena and his inconclusive description of them. In other words, Simmel's insistence on form has a purely aesthetic substructure.¹⁹ Despite this breakthrough in Simmelian scholarship, the discussion and link between *lebensphilosophie* and relativism is relatively marginal. Both epistemological doctrines acquire the character of either reductionistic attempts at explanation or dissolution of all explanation. For example, for Frisby,

Never committing himself to any standpoint - except perhaps the aesthetic one which is, by its nature, grounded in detachment - Simmel was left with a reduction of social complexity to a simplified category of life. (Frisby 1981: 156)

Here we are dealing with the reification of one aspect (aesthetic) of Simmel's theory, the

¹⁸ Simmel (1968 : 74)

¹⁹ Frisby draws also this aesthetic premise from Simmel's writings on Kant (Frisby 1992 : 135-136).

validity of which works at the expense of others (relational relativism, vitalism). Simmel's Romantic residue of the sociologist - aesthete is a direct outcome of his firm belief in the value of life and openness of method in knowledge of reality; it was partly formulated as a reaction to the dry and rigid empiricism and positivism of Comptean social science. The recourse to vitalism from a theorist who has indeed pursued some of the most meticulous and perceptive work in all of sociology is a sign of an awareness of the difficulties surrounding explanation rather than a surrender to a quasi-agnostic or socially distant metaphysical view of life. His use of vitalism, as I shall try to argue, encourages explanatory progress through the notion of transcendence, and his relativism safeguards explanation and thought mainly through the use of regulative ideas, from the dull extremism of either dogmatism or commonsense relativism. Both vitalism and relativism contain a rigorous social element of explanation and involvement rather than detachment.

According to Frisby (1985), on the issue of modernity Simmel is again in search of the cosmic meaning within individual entity. Here Simmel's approach bears such an aesthetic quality as the one his commentator outlines. Socially speaking,

if the supra-individual whole is supposed to be independently coherent and to realize its own objective notion of itself with self-sufficient significance, then it cannot possibly tolerate any independence on the part of its members [...] [A painting does not grow] out of other paintings, but only out of strokes of the brush not one of which on its own possesses any completeness, independent life or aesthetic significance. (Simmel 1978: 494)

This view epitomizes not only Simmel's impressionism and aestheticism, but it also points to the relational aspect in his thought where the autonomy of the whole emerges through the lack of qualitative autonomy of its parts. Reciprocity in this sense can be interpreted as creative activity since it gives rise to a qualitative construction and cohesion of a particular whole through the creative interaction of its parts no matter how differentiated or elaborate these might be. Simmel's relativism serves precisely this function: rather than stripping things from their qualities by dismembering their normative links with the rest of the whole, and reducing them into things devoid of qualities, therefore non-entities, it affirms actors' qualities *as* qualities only in relation to other actors in the same coherent organic whole. This kind of relativism, or as Simmel prefers "relativity", refers to "the reciprocal character of the significance of criteria of knowledge" which "appear in the form of alternation or succession".²⁰ This alternation or succession occurs in a consistent way. It is part of a general discussion to follow on Simmel's relativism.

²⁰ Simmel (1978 : 113)

Frisby hints at this relational element in his most recent (1992) exposition of Simmel's social theory in relation to wider issues of modernity and postmodernity. Here, the epistemological implications of Simmel's thought for postmodern theories bear the marks of a relativism and vitalism that translates substances into motions (time, space and causality are subjected to this qualitative change)²¹. Does this dynamic openness towards criteria of knowledge allow Simmel to enter the domain of postmodern discourse where the incomplete solution of contradiction is being transformed to the complete contradiction of solution ?²² Frisby warns against this sort of misrepresentation of most of 19th and early 20th century critique of modernity including Nietzsche's and Simmel's. The argument that I am making shares the same objective but its means are relativism and vitalism, doctrines which are mostly (and falsely) associated with a view that negates progress. It is to Simmel's credit that his multifarious thought bears relevance to current debates in postmodernity. But Simmel's incomplete solutions do not render solutions inadequate ; they rather generate - through their incomplete adequacy²³ - the conditions for the rise of new problems and the need for more complete solutions.

More recent studies challenge the picture of Simmel as an "impressionist sociologist" and set out to explore the possibilities of Simmel's full incorporation into postmodern arguments. Deena and Michael Weinstein (1993) draw on what they see as the bridge between Simmel's sociology and postmodern theory : the notion of play. Sociability as the artificial form of sociation is presented as the Simmelian postmodern alternative to what the authors see as the threat of postmodern vitalist rebellion against the threat of formlessness. The so-called post-liberal subjectivity is based on Simmel's notion of play as a means of affirming reality and not being drawn in the negative and destructive possibilities of the postmodern age. What seems to me to be misunderstood by the authors is the fact that Simmel's definition of sociability restricts its function within a cultural context that holds its cultural forms firm on the ground. Since "sociability plays with the forms of society"²⁴, it qualifies as play only if there are forms to play with.²⁵ The acceptance/existence of formlessness as a social fact renders sociability the form *per se* of society and the quality of game becomes transparent, therefore non-game. In other

²¹ Frisby (1992 : 163-164)

²² Regarding the contradictory character of various postmodern theories, a paper by Holmwood and Stewart (1993: 11-15) has exerted considerable influence on my argument, although the solution I offer is radically different from theirs.

²³ This statement bears close relevance to the kind of progressive relativism and perspectivism which is encountered in Vaihinger's theory of fictions.

²⁴ Simmel (1950: 51)

²⁵ Flirtation, for example, qualifies as the play-form of eroticism only if there is genuine erotic feeling as such. If the latter is absent from the social context, its play-form is absent as well.

words, as Simmel warns,

The game becomes a lie only when sociable action and speech are made into mere instruments of the intentions and events of practical reality - just as a painting becomes a lie when it tries, in a panoramic effect, to simulate reality. What is perfectly correct and in order if practiced within the autonomous life of sociability with its self-contained play of forms, becomes deceptive lie when it is guided by non-sociable purposes or is designed to disguise such purposes. (Simmel 1950: 49)

This kind of disguise of sociability that Simmel identifies is what the authors attempt to achieve when they hold that play is a defense-mechanism or a "survival strategy" on the face of "cultural tyranny and formlessness"²⁶. How can the personal subjectivity thrive and develop when the quality of its fellow-players is equally deficient as its own? Inevitably, "postmodernity is judged on the quality" (failure) "of its play(ers)"²⁷.

This brief examination of commentaries on Simmel sets up the parameters for the discussion to follow and also points to strengths and weaknesses of previous interpretations which the present study will address. The transition from Simmel the epistemologist to Simmel the cultural critic has not been entirely successful since the most substantial parts of his epistemology were not understood in all their complexity. Since epistemology is always the basis for a theory of culture, Simmel's thought ought to be seen from a new synthetic angle.

IV. Survey of themes

What does our culture really represent for the most part? Only this: that we create instruments in order to mitigate the suffering that we inflict upon ourselves, in order to diminish the needs that we ourselves have created, and in order to resolve - quite incompletely - the contradictions that we have generated. For if these resolutions were complete and conclusive, it would not be necessary to change them continually. (Simmel 1980: 89-90)

Simmel's claim is read by most people as an argument against dogmatism or absolutism regarding particular solutions to problems. In another sense, it warns against the fixation of permanence for theoretical paradigms which are obviously structured around problem-solving activity. It is clearly drawn from a relativistic and perspectivistic angle. However, by looking only at the negative motivations in Simmel's claim one

²⁶ Weinstein and Weinstein (1993 : 223-224)

²⁷ Ibid. (: 224)

overlooks a crucial fact : that Simmel regards problems and contradictions as resolvable; the statement about the lack of completion in a particular solution alerts man against any reification of a particular solution (i.e. its elevation into dogma or rigid theory). Additionally, it encourages belief in the provisional viability of a solution for a particular set of problems and contradictions.

These methodological considerations have been at the centre of what I interpret as a problematic aspect of current sociological theory: its lack of a substantive framework that would encompass epistemology and cultural critique. The most current version of sociological theory resides on its own self-denial and it is represented through postmodernism. The negation of epistemology by most postmodern writers²⁸ has as its immediate result a realistic, empiricist, and egalitarian framework of sociological conduct. These are unfortunately carried on a vulgar egalitarian basis: a downward levelling process where the dissolution of criteria is taken for methodological pluralism. The social actor becomes the adjudicator of sociological explanation, an explanation which has taken the form of a practical, immediately digestible translation of social theory into social policy. If this type of realist orientation sounds familiar, it is because it was identified as a threat to knowledge by the German academic community at the turn of the century and it formed an organic part of the *Kulturkritik* of the times. Since Simmel and others were part of this critique of modernity their thought and methodology bears the marks of their attitude to knowledge. At this stage I have no intention of criticising the current stage of modern sociology; I simply would like to stress the fact that the egalitarian anarchy of postmodern theories is largely based on the utilization of deficient or extreme aspects of the *Kulturkritik*. Hence the general impression that relativism and vitalism are associated with the destruction of substance or constancy as categories for explaining the social world ; this corresponds only to the shallow version of both doctrines.

A means of clarifying these problems lies in a reappraisal of classical German sociological theory. Sociology was then confronted with a profound crisis - the parameters of which I have already sketched - and the current stage of Western civilization has only slightly shifted from that pervasive and compelling framework of analysis of

²⁸ As I have indicated earlier my references to postmodernity are only scattered since they cannot be fully incorporated to the argument in its present aim and form. However, my criticisms as to their idea of epistemology and sociology is inspired by their pathos for decadence and explanatory failure. While ontologizing failure by rendering it endemic to social life, postmodern thinkers like Lyotard and Baudrillard, use the categories they sought to eliminate. If they indeed attack essentialism, and the essence of life is its inexplicable, unknown and fragmented character, then they remove the grounds for the validity of their own argument. Additionally, Vattimo despite a more sophisticated and intricate exposition, surrenders himself to aesthetics where "[thought] may open itself up to the only partially negative and 'fallen' meaning [...] which the experience of aestheticity has acquired in the era of mechanical reproduction of mass culture." (Vattimo 1988: 64). My criticisms of postmodernity refer precisely to this spirit of evaluation of social life.

modern man. What seems to me to be the case is that irrespective of the extreme (or conservative) positions to which a number of thinkers adhered and which obviously bear testimony to the depths of the crisis, the main tenets of the *Kulturkritik* can be adequately utilized by modern sociology.

In Chapter 1, I set out to examine the precise relationship between relativism and Simmel's theory of forms. Since a substantial part of this area has been covered by other scholars I take many of Simmel's ideas for granted, and I prefer to concentrate on issues which seem partially or wholly unexplored. Looking at Simmel's departure from Kant, I outline the heuristic-relativistic character of his theory of forms and I delineate some of its premises via a reference to some of his critics (Mannheim, Winch).

The particular mode by which Simmel seeks to propose a relativistic epistemology is looked at through the concept of relationism. Relationism stands for the reconciliation of various forms of relativism which are to be found in Simmel. It echoes some notions of the kind of relativity articulated in the natural sciences and it achieves a more prominent character through Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. However, as I try to demonstrate, Mannheim's premises are largely the outcome of Simmel's earlier formulations. In *The Philosophy of Money* we find Simmel's complete exposition of his relativism and in part of Chapter 2 I analyze it in detail and place it within his general framework of study.

Simmel's writings on the philosophy of history are inextricably linked to relativism, although to an idiosyncratic version of it. It is part of the debate on historicism that intellectually shaped this period and it is tied to issues regarding hermeneutics and interpretation. We can perhaps understand better the intersection between historicism, relativism and vitalism if we look at Simmel in relation to Wilhelm Dilthey (Chapter 3) who was the first thinker to establish the notions of *Verstehen* (understanding) and *Erleben* (lived experience) in historiography. In both thinkers, these are used - despite an omnipresent relativism/subjectivism - as a basis for a progressive evolution of the human sciences.

The notion of vitalism therefore, now becomes more central to the argument. In Chapter 4, I relocate the significance of vitalist epistemology for an understanding of modernity paying particular attention to the work of Henri Bergson, firstly because Simmel has regularly been compared to him, and secondly because with Bergson we get the first glimpse of vitalism's affiliation to modernity. The course of history and society is then examined further, according to the vitalistic and relativistic patterns advocated by Spengler. His philosophy of history confirms several of the previous trends in European thought at that time. By looking at the affinities between him and Simmel (Chapter 5) - particularly in their critique of modern life - I aim at a reappraisal of Spengler's views

which, as in the case of Simmel, have been misconceived by many modern scholars. Despite the different alternatives they offer, both thinkers aim at establishing a theory of civilization that transcends what is now seen as the condition of postmodernity. The relativistic consequences of modernity which have given rise to the notion of postmodernity, are explored finally in Chapter 6 where I set out to describe Simmel's theory of culture in relation to Nietzsche's nihilism and epistemology. The fact that the latter attempt to build a meta-interpretation of Western man based on all the negative and deficient conceptions implicit in the *Kulturkritik* of the 1890s - 1930s, reveals only the lack of a theoretic alternative for contemporary social science. This alternative framework ought to be discovered and the conditions for this realization are given through reference to *Kulturkritik's* most rigorous concept namely, transcendence. If social science seeks a proper understanding of modern times simultaneously with an understanding of its own continuity as a science, then it needs to return to this intellectual tradition in order to redefine and refine its major concepts and categories.

Chapter 1: Relativism and the Sociology of Forms

I. Sketching the Problem

The common denominator in the different facets of Simmel's social thought has been for many commentators the distinction between form and content. This methodological dualism is an integral part of Simmel's work, whether we're dealing with his writings on microsociological forms of interaction, his analyses of gender and aesthetics or his metaphysical theory of life. In all cases, the *modus operandi* which guides his dissection and scrutiny of sociological phenomena is that of isolating the undifferentiated material of life from its purely social manifestations. This fundamental division is indeed at the core of Simmel's procedure in describing and eventually understanding social relations ; and as part of a systematic method it has been designated as "formal sociology". This label though has been problematic for an adequate appraisal of Simmel's sociology. The problem stems from the fact that his "formal sociology" has been brought to existence at the expense of other aspects of Simmel's epistemology. For example, the link between reciprocity and relativity as features of formal sociology were strangely neglected by major interpreters of Simmel's work, such as Kurt Wolff, Donald Levine and David Frisby. The increasingly selective interpretation of Simmel, especially in the United States, may have been because his relativism was not taken to be a valid epistemological doctrine. Allegedly it threatened the systematic development, both theoretical and empirical, of sociology.

The issue therefore of formal sociology or better, of the sociology of forms²⁹ has to be readdressed and examined as part of Simmel's relativistic theory. To some, this may seem a paradoxical task since the way "formal sociology" is been commonly perceived (and the way it appears in sociology textbooks and dictionaries) suggests that it is incompatible with a relativistic epistemology. However, as I shall try to demonstrate, the opposite seems to be the case, namely that Simmel's sociology of forms and his idiosyncratic relativism ought to be viewed not as discrete and inconsistent aspects of his work, but rather as mutually determined and coherent parts of it.

This is not an entirely new claim. Alfred Mamelet, for example, in his seminal thesis on Simmel³⁰ outlines the sociological relativism which characterizes the latter's

²⁹ The first , to my knowledge, scholar who attempted the redefinition of Simmel's sociology, from "formal sociology" to "sociology of forms" is Stephen Crook (1991 : 52)

³⁰ Alfred Mamelet (1914)

conception of a study of society. Also, more recently, Michael Kaern has, albeit very briefly, pointed to the relativistic essence of the sociology of forms.³¹ My approach although it shares some territory with Mamelet's and Kaern's theses, has a somewhat different orientation. The incorporation of the sociology of forms within a relativistic epistemology demands the bringing together of a systematic theoretic tool with what has been regarded as perhaps the most unsystematic attitude towards knowledge. The resolution of this tension can only be achieved through a radically new conception of both approaches. That is, the formalist approach should not be regarded as a rigid methodical scheme but rather as a heuristic principle, and similarly relativism should not be equated with the destruction of truth-criteria, which, in the case of sociology, leads to a kind of "social solipsism"³², but rather to the authentication of these criteria through reciprocity. Several problems in the assessment of Simmel's work in sociology have their roots in either the exclusion or the truncated inclusion of the theory of relativism which makes its appearance felt even in the writings which are characterized by Simmel's positivistic and evolutionist attitude towards the study of society. To illustrate some of the problems which have cropped up during sociological discussions of the subject-matter, method and objectives of sociology in Simmel's theory, I shall refer to what I regard as debatable and highly questionable evaluations of the whole or part of Simmel's sociology of forms. Obviously one cannot afford at this stage an exhaustive reference to the large bulk of secondary literature on Simmel which would give a panoramic but perhaps over detailed picture of the debate ; this is clearly not my purpose. In clarifying my own dissatisfaction with the way "formal sociology" has been treated and "recycled" through the academic world, I shall use as reference points the evaluations and critiques on Simmel's theory of forms by Mamelet, Weingartner, Frisby and Winch. More importantly, I shall also discuss the covert criticism by Karl Mannheim on what is perhaps the most well-known case of Simmel's formalist method, namely super-subordination. Before that however in order to place the argument within the appropriate context, it is necessary to discuss some of the main premises of Simmel's sociology of forms.

For the rest of the discussion I shall employ the term "sociology of forms" to describe Simmel's approach rather than using the established label, namely "formal sociology". It seems that the former is closer to what Simmel had in mind, since it denotes the study of forms of sociation albeit from a distance, whereas the latter seems to

³¹ Kaern suggests that "Simmel's relativism applies also to the form-content relation ; what is content is a content only in relation to something else which is a form" (Kaern, 1986 : 58). Although an acute observation, the author's section on the form-content dichotomy does not address the novelty of this reappraisal of Simmel's theory in relation to the hitherto prevalent accounts of it.

³² The expression belongs to Parsons (1937 : 447)

indicate a kind of sociological approach which is exclusively based on formalistic grounds, which was neither Simmel's purpose nor method.

II. The Kantian heritage

Despite the attention that the dualism of form and content has received from Simmel scholars, if we are to identify the key elements of his sociological approach we need to turn to his own definitions, obscure as they sometimes are. This points to interpretive difficulties which have their origins in the arbitrariness with which Simmel exhibits, analyzes and contrasts principal aspects of his method. It might therefore be possible to trace passages from Simmel's work which contradict my interpretation ; however without wishing to underestimate this problem I shall have to stress the fact that it is still feasible to extract and formulate an adequate interpretation of his theory based on the core of his thought, namely relativism.

Some of the themes which recur in the methodological outline of a sociology of forms in Simmel bear the marks of Kant's influence. At a time when philosophy seemed to break away from German Idealism the newly-formulated social sciences were becoming subject to the influence of Neo-Kantianism. Most notably, in history and sociology the thread of this intellectual movement was strongly felt. Therefore it seems appropriate to begin our discussion with some reference to Kant. However, we should note here that our treatment of Kant, and Simmel's appraisal of Kant's thought, shall remain necessarily brief. This is due to the fact that an excursus on Kant transcends the scope and potential of this thesis ; regarding Simmel's thoughts on Kant we shall restrict ourselves to the theory of knowledge.

In order to grasp the crux of Simmel's criticism and deviation from the Kantian philosophy we need to turn back to the opening pages of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* where we find a definition of form and content (matter). Having outlined the faculty of the mind to receive representations from reality, by means of *sensibility* , Kant proceeds in distinguishing the two aspects of the appearance of an object upon the mind as follows:

That in the appearance which corresponds to sensation I term its *matter* ; but that which so determines the manifold of appearance that it allows of being ordered in certain relations, I term the *form* of appearance. . . while the matter of all appearance is given to us *a posteriori* only, its form must lie ready for the sensations *a priori* in the mind. . . ([italics in the original] Kant 1990: 65-66)

Kant's reasoning reveals certain features which are present in Simmel's basic

formulations. For example, we are confronted here with an epistemological opposition in the Kantian thought namely the one between form, subject, a priori against matter (content), object, a posteriori. Also, the fact that *forming* means *structuring* relates to Simmel's use of the dualism of form and content throughout his sociology. It is important additionally, to note that the idea of content in Simmel's terminology and the Kantian "thing-in-itself" have certain affinities. As Weingartner aptly notes, both the content and the "thing-in-itself" can never be fully grasped ; "they are only approached" but "not arrived at".³³ Thus, the germ of Simmel's subsequent epistemological ideas lies undoubtedly in Kant although as we shall see shortly certain fundamental features of Kantianism were omitted during the development and articulation of Simmel's theory of forms.

Numerous scholars have attempted to place Simmel's epistemological foundations within the context of Kantian metaphysics but only few were able to present with relative clarity the affiliation or deviation between them. Thus, before displaying the two most fundamental points of Simmel's departure from Kant, we ought to consider some of the manifold links between their thoughts as presented by eminent interpreters of Simmel's work. Alfred Mamelet locates the difference between Kant and Simmel along several levels. The problem as he sees it stems from the Kantian theory of consciousness and the *a priori* categories of knowledge. Kant preoccupies himself with the problem of cognition, to the particular mode according to which the chaos of sensations becomes structured and intelligible to the human mind. The vehicles by which we comprehend the world and by which we create unity out of multiplicity can be termed *categories* according to Kant (these are structured symmetrically where Kant distinguishes between four groups of three) or *forms* in Simmel's terms. One of the most important categories is the one of *causality* which as we shall see shortly has given rise to several objections. Another integral aspect of Kant's polymorphic hierarchy of categories pertains to the fact that the function of unification of the contents through the categories, "is possible because the mind, in which [this unification] occurs, itself is a unit, an ego".³⁴ This unification and absolutization of the Ego in relation to the cognition and creation of the world is emphasized further by Fichte and is given serious consideration by Simmel as well, who remains a skeptic as to the certainty with which one can maintain the distinction between subjective and objective knowledge at a sphere different from the one determined by the Ego³⁵. For Kant though, the Ego is identical in all human beings and is made into an

³³ Weingartner in Wolff (ed.) (1959)

³⁴ Simmel(1950 : 69)

³⁵ Simmel (1978 : 331)

Ideal which inheres in the human species. The elevation of the Ego onto a basis which is identical and homogeneous in all men renders it also sovereign of anything extrinsic to it, of "all possible entanglements with nature, Thou, society".³⁶ This essentially Platonic conception³⁷, according to which the world and consequently the cognition of the world is solely a reflection of the Ego or of Ideas in Plato, points to Kant's individualism which is also to be found in various forms in Simmel's thought. It is along this nexus of relationships and concepts in Kant, that Simmel has been influenced by and has sought to escape from. The difficulties which he saw in Kant are summarised by Mamelet along three lines. The first objection relates to the character of the *a priori* categories. Simmel although accepting the notion of the *a priori*, nevertheless undermines its Kantian formulation. The *a priori* cannot be exhausted by a limited number of categories or forms of consciousness. The certitude of this *a priori* is established through the knowledge of the function of encompassing experience in form. For Simmel it is this function itself which is the true *a priori*.³⁸ The Kantian notion of *a priori* remains just an abstract idea whose existence and validity we are able to detect and ascertain only through its function ; at the *a priori* itself we can never arrive. There is thus no pre-determined number of categories inbuilt within the structure of the mind but only functions which are "moving and indeterminable in their immediacy".³⁹ Here, Kantian intellectualism is being replaced with psychologism and vitalism the same way the *a priori* is itself being made a subject of "the movement of psychological life".⁴⁰

³⁶ Simmel(1950 : 70)

³⁷ The affiliation between Plato and Kant has been presented in a polemical manner by Bergson as follows: "[...] the whole Critique of Pure Reason ends in establishing that Platonism, illegitimate if Ideas are things, becomes legitimate if Ideas **are relations** , and that the ready-made idea, once brought down in this way from heaven to earth, is in fact, as Plato held, the common basis alike of thought and of nature. But the whole of the Critique of Pure Reason also rests on this postulate, that our intellect is incapable of anything but Platonising ; that is, **of pouring all possible experience into pre-existing molds.**" ([Emphasis added]Bergson, 1913 : 72-73) From this criticism by Bergson - at a later chapter we shall see that Bergson's vitalistic philosophy does not fully escape Platonism - one can extract two notions which point to the evolution of Simmel's relativism from Kant, but also to the departure of Simmel's forms from the Kantian categories. Firstly, the fact that things are replaced by relations points to Simmel's anti-essentialism which is further elaborated through relationism. Secondly, the fact that categories or forms in Simmelian terminology are prior to experience marks the starting-point for Simmel's escape from Kantianism through his vitalism and the possibility - or necessity - of Life to create new forms for cognition and understanding of reality ; consequently, experience develops the categories in opposition to the rigidity of the Kantian scheme which wants experience subordinate to pre-given categories. Briefly stated, as Life evolves, experience is enriched and so are the categories or forms in order to become supreme over this experience. Also on another level, Simmel in discussing forms and individualism offers another deviation from Kant, stressing that the fundamental consciousness of the ego is not a definite or definitive representation. (Simmel 1912: 221-222)

³⁸ Mamelet (1913 : 709)

³⁹Ibid. : 710 [My translation]

⁴⁰ibid.[My translation]

The second objection to the Kantian reasoning pertains to the argument about the function of the categories. For Kant, given that "the categories do not always function, when they don't, there is no consciousness and valid experience".⁴¹ The question which arises for Simmel, asks about the criterion according to which we can distinguish or verify a valid experience from an invalid one, other than using the application of the categories. In other words, Simmel points to a lacuna in Kant's formulation which makes feasible the hypothesis that there is something *other* than the *a priori* categories which determines the validity of experience ; eventually as Simmel believes, Kant's scheme falls into a vicious circle. Expressed differently, "the intervention of the *a priori* " fulfills "the criterion of the validity of experience" and at the same time, "the validity of experience" serves the criterion "of the intervention of the *a priori* ".⁴² This criticism conforms with Simmel's approach on experience (*Erleben*) as the generator of both subject and object, as the force which causes the objectification of content, namely the creation of form.⁴³ Form and experience exist in a reciprocal relation of mutual understanding and determination which makes the norms of the Kantian *a priori* categories applicable only to certain cases.

Mamelet suggests that for Simmel there seems to be one additional difficulty in Kant's theory. This relates to the notion of the categories of understanding which allow the so-called material of consciousness - that is, the succession of impressions - to achieve unity in a judgement.⁴⁴ At this stage we do not need a detailed exposition of the intricacies of this Kantian notion for it bears little relevance to the actual arguments by Simmel regarding his theory of forms. Suffice to say that Simmel challenges once more the objectivity of the "judgements of experience" by dissolving it into reciprocity. Objectivity thus becomes nothing more than a name for the provisional fixity which characterizes the vacillation of consciousness between two antithetical poles : the pure experience and the pure *a priori* . Instead of representing consciousness as spirit, Simmel according to Mamelet, relativizes it by transforming it into "a synthetic and living activity,

⁴¹ibid. : 711 [My translation]

⁴²ibid. : 711-712 [My translation]

⁴³ Weingartner in Wolff (1959 : 44) At this stage it might be useful to stress the point of the criticism through the work of other commentators on Kant. Karl Jaspers for example, in his discussion of the Kantian categories remarks that : "[...] it is permissible to think that new experience may enrich and clarify the system, though without ever making it final. In fact, there is no theoretical reason why in the course of time new categories should not be discovered ad infinitum. But then Kant's claim to definitive completeness must be abandoned."(1962 : 27) On the same grounds and by means of the vitalistic philosophy, Simmel resorts to the "open" possibility for the creation of new forms whether we are dealing with categories, forms, types in the epistemological sense, or forms in relation to culture and civilization. As we shall see at a later chapter there are direct analogies between the grounds for change in forms both in the epistemological and cultural aspects of a social scientific enterprise.

⁴⁴ Mamelet (1913 : 713)

oscillating between these two correlated poles."⁴⁵ For Mamelet, rightly to a certain extent, it is the combination of factors such as psychologism, evolutionism and pragmatism which have led Simmel to extend Kantian relativism. As we shall see at a later stage of this thesis this claim holds true especially for the first two intellectual movements.

Following the same line of argumentation - that is, based on the three major objections which Simmel raises against Kant - François Léger emphasizes some additional points. For example, he stresses the fact that causality - one of the three *relational* categories in Kant's system - does not inhere in the mind but, as both Simmel and Bergson hold, it's only "a rule which we impose on reality for the needs of consciousness."⁴⁶ The conclusions which Léger reaches are similar to Mamelet's and compatible with Simmel's epistemology. The forms or categories are susceptible to the change, evolution and development of the mind ; it is thus more appropriate to hold, as Simmel does with regard to the forms of consciousness, that "our mind does not possess these forms, it *is* these forms."⁴⁷

To recapitulate and conclude this brief exposition we need finally to stress the two fundamental notions which distinguish Simmel from Kant and which comprise the axes of the discussion up to the concluding sections of this thesis. Returning to Simmel's *magnum opus*, *The Philosophy of Money* and more specifically to its strictly epistemological parts, we read :

Much that was once considered *a priori* has later been recognized as an empirical and historical construct. On the one hand, we have the task of seeking in every phenomenon, beyond the content provided by sense impressions, the permanent *a priori* norms by which it is formed ; but on the other, the maxim applies that we should attempt to trace every single *a priori* (but not the *a priori* as such) back to its source in experience. (Simmel 1978: 114)

The most important point here, regarding relativism is the mutual determination of *a priori* norms and experience. The dual need of man to seek constancy and change in permanent forms and socially constructed fluid experience points to the necessity of viewing this apparent contradiction as an integral part of human reasoning. The relativist

⁴⁵Ibid. : 714 [My translation]

⁴⁶ Léger (1989 : 123-124). See also : 120

⁴⁷Ibid.: 127 For Simmel whatever has been bequeathed to us through past experience can at any point be altered : "Even the mind has to be drawn into the flow of evolution. Even if our experience and our knowledge and discovery of nature are brought about by a priori norms, why should these norms not show an evolution, a never ending flow, which never lets experience come to an end."(Simmel in Kaern, 1986 : 27) The consequences of this argument are particularly noticeable in Simmel's treatment of scientific progress which resembles not only Kuhn's but also Feyerabend's writings on science.

standpoint comes into the picture in Simmel's assertion that every norm, type or form which has been taken to be absolute and pre-given either by nature, divine power or even science, proves sooner or later to be historically - and consequently, socially - conditioned. It is this intellectual effort, to trace every *a priori* back to its psychological or social sources, which seems to be compatible with relativism (Are all *a priori* criteria socially, historically or even psychically conditioned ? Is there an *a priori* norm whose validity remains extrinsic to socially constructed knowledge?)⁴⁸ However, that there must be something given *a priori* Simmel does not deny ; this pre-determined norm or idea though can never be arrived at. As we shall see at a later stage Simmel's thought is covertly yet consistently guided by this form of agnosticism which holds the existence of an unattainable absolute.

The other aspect which is crucial for our discussion and which stems from the Simmelian critique of Kant's essentialism, refers to the evolution of our organs of perception and forms of cognition. In an attempt to clear sociological understanding from the obstacles placed by rigid methodical categories, and to introduce new ones such as "distinction", Simmel purports to show

[...] that the systematic approach as such is just as erroneous here as it is with regard to the five senses or the twelve Kantian categories of reason. The development of our species continuously creates new possibilities for responding to the world both sensually and intellectually and new categories for evaluating it. And just as we constantly form new and effective ideals, so our growing consciousness discloses ever new ones of which we were unconscious, even though they were already effective. (Simmel 1978: 390)

This evolutionist orientation - grounded in the theory of Lamarck - lies at the core of Simmel's position and is retained throughout the study of the forms of sociation. It is the safeguard against the absolutization of any methodology in social science or against any cultural institution which threatens to dominate life. The Kantian heritage - blended through *lebensphilosophie* and relativism - has helped Simmel to develop a study of society held through forms from dissolving into chaos, and protected through living experience from adhering to methodological dogma ; the operation of the form-content dualism confirms this fact.

⁴⁸ For a discussion of these questions as they're addressed in Simmel and in modern relativistic theories, see chapter 2.

III. The form-content dichotomy in Simmel

Simmel's procedure is reminiscent of Dilthey's efforts to discover the proto-forms of understanding regarding human experience. Dilthey attempted to introduce another sphere of understanding of social phenomena beyond the strictly social level, which unlike Simmel's inclination towards psychologism, was directed towards a quasi-biological explanation of social action. It is precisely this facet of human life which one may define as "content". Whatever appears in human beings in an undifferentiated form, namely "drive, interest, purpose, inclination, psychic state, movement" and which renders interaction potentially feasible is the "content" or the "material" of life.⁴⁹ Content thus could be designated as the biological or psychic predisposition of man ; in other words, it is the *a-social* aspect of man. These aspects in themselves, do not comprise society. Society is created only when all these biological and psychological factors "transform the mere aggregation of isolated individuals into specific forms of being with and for one another".⁵⁰ These forms, entirely new in their conception and function, make society possible. Forms are thus the channels through which contents are filtered and communicated from individual to individual, in such a way as to fulfill the purpose of meaningful interaction. This is a rather straightforward conception in Simmel, and there is more or less general consistency in the appraisals of his views on that aspect. One for example, could make an analogy with Bergson's main dualism on instinct and intelligence which as we shall see at a later chapter is almost identical in its conception with Simmel's content and form dichotomy ; the common ground for both thinkers is here the polarity between the non-social and the social features of man. For Simmel, the science of sociology must proceed by constructing methodological tools on the basis of certain characteristics which correspond in "actual social life" only to "beginnings and fragments", which in the course of social evolution are "constantly interrupted and modified".⁵¹ The consequence of this operation results to the unavoidable fact that these forms, or "ideal types" may be inconsistent with the "historical realizations of their contents".⁵² Taking religion as an example, one may assert that the principles of religious experience as they were first displayed in human societies prior to modernization were still capable of giving form to the religious content. However, for reasons which may be attributed to the rapid and complex division of labour, such as differentiation and

⁴⁹ Simmel (1950 : 40-41)

⁵⁰ Ibid.:41

⁵¹ *ibid.* : 200

⁵²*ibid.*

consumerism, religious institutions fail consistently to provide satisfaction for the religious content. The dogmatically imposed rule-following of religious institutions seemed to be incompatible with the growing pace of the lives of individuals in modern urban environments and the general tendency against subordination to closely-tied and rigid groups. Consequently, the lag between religion and (unsatisfied) religious feeling increased. The growing discrepancies between form and content lead to the breakdown of old form and consequently to the need for the creation of a new one.⁵³ This is nothing other than the demonstration that contents cannot be grasped either in their purity or in their dynamic movement. The fact that their social manifestation, i.e form, has become inadequate as an explanatory and integrating category, reveals the temporary status of forms and the impossibility of fully understanding a content through the statics of formal methodology. This is a "limitation" which Simmel imposes upon his own methodology but it functions as an awareness of a problem and not as a restriction. This particular position is a corollary of Simmel's vitalistic and relativistic philosophy.⁵⁴ Simmel accepts the fact that

the category of content and form is one of the most relative and subjective in the entire area of thought. What is form in one respect is content in another [...] (Simmel in Wolff ed. 1959: 34)

At a very general level, this takes the form of the oscillation of the human intellect between unity and multiplicity or wholeness and individuality, an alternation between extremes which according to Simmel is intrinsic to the faculty of the human mind.⁵⁵ Man can only sense reality by interpreting its chaotically scattered elements through fixed formulae which occasionally may have the form of a dualism. Form and content is the means by which man structures the material of his reality. It is not an exhaustive explanatory mechanism for this would be virtually meaningless, since it would imply total knowledge of reality. Simmel elevates the whole issue onto the cosmic contrast between the structureless world which is "determined in itself" and the plurality of forms - as they're created by man - which distill the world's contents or "the world as content"⁵⁶ into meaningful and useful, ideas, images and concepts. Form *is* culture and *is produced* by culture at the same time. As we shall see at a later stage of the thesis, the same analogy

⁵³ Hence the contrast between Simmelian and Kantian forms. As Kaern puts it : "For Kant, forms are permanent while for Simmel they may undergo change." (Kaern, 1986 : 28)

⁵⁴ Rudolph Weingartner makes similar assertions as to the relation between Simmel's philosophy of culture and his philosophy of experience and life. (Weingartner in Wolff ed., 1959 : 55)

⁵⁵ Simmel in Kaern, (1986 : 25)

⁵⁶ Simmel in Wolff(ed), (1959 : 288)

applies to life and its creative potential to produce new forms.

Man possesses the world only because he gives form to undifferentiated matter, and yet this world, the world of culture gives rise to new forms which in their turn shape those contents which obsolete forms were unable to define. This dual role of forms is of primary importance for it illustrates one of the levels of relativity which according to Simmel is an integral part of this epistemological notion. The fact that, whatever was *form* in the past may now be rendered *content*, points to the fact that this distinction is to a certain extent fictional since the two elements take on the same character according to different socio-historical circumstances. This interpretation is echoed in Simmel's statement that

[...] the separation of man as a social being and as an individual is a necessary and useful fiction. (Simmel 1950: 248)

This statement can be quite useful if applied to the form-content dichotomy, because it is on this "fiction" that the formalist principle is built. The juxtaposition between the social and the individual, no matter how artificial it may be, is what determines to a large degree the qualitative differentiation of form and content; both pairs are epistemological categories which are constructed and used in order to apprehend reality.⁵⁷ In other words, they are *conventions* whose function is necessary but by no means comprehensive or definitive. For example, whereas mysticism could be considered as a form by which man confronted the world transcendently and metaphysically, it is through the gradual organization of this experience a new form developed: religion. It is now by means of religion that one attempts to grasp the mystical essence of the world. Mysticism as form has in modern times been transformed to mysticism as content. This as we shall argue further in the thesis, accounts for Simmel's but particularly Bergson's nostalgia for the pure content in religious experience which is no other than mysticism. Again, the rapport between form and content takes the mode of a dynamic relation of interdependence since any determination as to what is taken to be content or form, is conditioned by the specific socio-historical locale within which it happens to develop.

Another indication of the relativism which is present in the sociology of forms, pertains to the argument about the autonomous character of forms. The transition here refers from the stage of proto-forms of human culture towards refined and ultimately pure forms of social structure. This is a very interesting idea and it's worth speculating on what the substance of the argument is. It seems that in the first stages of human culture

⁵⁷ "[Reality] which itself cannot be the immediate subject matter of science [...] becomes amenable to cognition only by means of categories such as [...] 'individual' or 'society'" (Simmel, 1950 : 8-9).

there was a running together of what are now regarded as autonomous, pure or even incommensurable forms. One for example may argue that religion, art and science, the way we understand them today, that is as highly developed categories, were once to a large extent subsumed under the idea of myth.⁵⁸ In any case at remote times in the past this familiar differentiation of the life-contents had not occurred or, better, it may have occurred but it was still at a very embryonic level. What we mean by this is perhaps better illustrated though an example from the history of economics. M.I. Finley in the opening pages of his *The Ancient Economy*, points to the variation between formal categories between past and present. Modern conceptions of marriage or economics differ radically of what we hold as being similar forms of social organization in antiquity.⁵⁹ The same could be asserted about art. It is very difficult to establish with certainty whether cave painting for example, which we regard as falling within the category or form of art, had an equivalent notion for the people of that time. Another example comes from science. How does one distinguish between proto-science and pure science? Or to put it differently, what sort of regularities does one have to establish in order to make the distinction not only between proto-form and form, but more importantly, between form and content? The clue for a possible answer lies in a rather intriguing excerpt from Simmel's essay on "The Nature of Philosophy". He speculates that

There must be a third something in man, beyond his individual subjectivity and the logical, objective thinking which is universally convincing [...] To use an approximate characterization this third level in us might be designated the *typical* mentality. For type is the kind of structure which neither coincides with particular, real individuality nor represents an objectivity beyond men and their lives. (Simmel in Wolff ed. 1959: 295-296)

This notion of *types* is the major conception in the sociology of forms. The fact that certain contents of social reality are identified as sharing common or similar properties, leads eventually to the need for classification. This process is functional for the reason that it provides a pattern - conceptual or linguistic - upon which one can build a similar sub-system and so on. The purpose of this long and complex process is in pragmatic

⁵⁸ Regarding myth Levi-Strauss (1989 : 21-22) claims that its distinction with science resides on the latter's apathy towards "living experience". Myth on the other hand is engaged in an endless process of reordering the various contents of life, in search of a structure. The constant flux which characterizes the myth - making function of man resides on the fact that the differentiation of contents between primary and secondary is a process of alternation rather than definitive abstraction or exclusion. The opposition manifests itself in the dualism between the mechanical unity of science and the organic unity of myth which "protests against the idea that anything can be meaningless".

⁵⁹ Finley suggests that "neither Greek or Latin has a word with which to express the commonest modern sense of "family" (:18)

terms to fulfill the needs posited by utility and in metaphysical terms to create order out of chaos or to discover the patterns of the ordered reality. Whichever way expressed, the abstraction *per se* of elements from reality on the basis of certain regularities which they exhibit, does not elevate them onto a nomological level (as we shall see at a later stage of the discussion, this is often explicitly, the accusation against the sociology of forms). On the other hand, these regularities imply a certain pattern of consistency which renders human behavior subject to a more general framework, namely social forms, which transcend the limits of specific cultural contexts. At first glance this seems incompatible with a relativistic world-view. This would have been the case only if one assumed that *form* remains permanently a valid epistemological category but as we have already pointed out this was not Simmel's idea. By this I mean that looked at from the standpoint of experience, forms are conventions which last through time and space only in so far as they fulfill the roles set up by reality, or as long as they are useful. At this stage we can say that forms are relatively *absolute* regarding the length of their life-span. Then, form overtakes content and appears as being *objectified*. However, the opposite is true as well, that is, forms are relative and subject to change and transformation, when they cease to fulfill the needs posited by utility. In this case, form is overtaken by content and experience pushes for the creation of a new form. The dual character of form and content is for Simmel the manifestation of the characteristic form of existence which oscillates between relativity and absoluteness. This train of thought is followed by Simmel regarding also the methodological repercussions of the typology of form and content in sociology:

Sociological patterns are revealed in social life in an unlimited number of ways, but these patterns themselves are emanations of more general and deeply seated psychological functions. Throughout, form and content are but relative concepts. They are categories of knowledge to master the phenomena, and to organize them intellectually, so that same thing which in any one relation, as though looked at from above, appears as form, must be labelled "content" in another relation, as though looked at from below. (Simmel 1955: 172)

The heuristic and "ideal" - in the Weberian sense - character of forms is constantly emphasized in order to safeguard this methodological device against any attempt to construe it as an exhaustive epistemological category. It is always necessary to keep in mind that the classification and organization of social phenomena according to groups, collectivities and types by no means places these phenomena within a nomological framework causal or other. A rationalistic model for example, does not necessarily suggest the sovereign presence of rational elements in reality. By the same token, a

formalistic system of explanation does not imply a claim in the preponderance of fully formalistically explained phenomena in social life. This confusion can lead to misinterpretations based on the identification of a methodological procedure with reality. Every method is a beginning in explanation and understanding and not an end in itself.

This fact points to the need for a new conception the sociology of forms within the sociological discourse. The usefulness of this approach is manifested as follows : firstly, as a provisional methodological frame of reference and secondly, as a methodological necessity of which social processes ought to be studied under particular circumstances. By the first point I mean that the typification of social phenomena and their incorporation into sociological understanding under the methodological construct of form is only a first, preliminary and above all, auxiliary stage. It is a stage where sociological understanding begins rather than concludes. Forms are the means by which sociological understanding finds orientation among the chaos of psychic and social stimuli of reality. If forms are absolutized or reified as methods, then inevitably we are led to a strictly formalistic interpretation of society, thus ignoring minute but significant aspects of the social world.

This brings us to the second assumption underlying the new conception of the sociology of forms. This pertains to the fact that certain social formations or ways by which individuals or collectivities enter in a process of interaction, can only be approached by the methodological tool of form. However, in this case, form is to be put to use heuristically, providing a methodological basis from which the sociologist can move to more detailed examinations of his subject. It can even be asserted that at a very basic level one can achieve some sort of sociological prognosis if a certain kind of action, which is in its first stages, displays characteristics and attributes which can be understood in relation and by reference to the archetypal features of form. A relationship of domination for example, between two individuals which is still at a very embryonic level, can be studied in relation to the possibility of its fully-fledged development, by reference to the general and abstract context of super-subordination. In order though to transcend the mere generalizations which forms necessarily provide, one has first to use their premises as vehicles of research despite the possibility that further examination (perhaps phenomenological) might ask for re-appraisal or even replacement of the forms initially employed. Simmel, to a large extent through his vitalistic orientation, points to the falsification of forms through experience. This bears relevance to form *as* a method and form *as* a category of culture. In both cases the movement from the general to the particular - from form to experience (or content) - may yield to conditions for the creation of a new general category under which the particular, singular and individual event demands to be subsumed. This conception of form not as static but as a dynamic category implies a methodological optimism absent from evaluations of Simmel's

sociology ; despite the fact that it remains only half-articulated in Simmel's work, it nevertheless has its roots firmly established in it.

An additional way of demonstrating the fact that Simmel's sociology of forms was part of his relativistic world-view, is through the scrutiny of critical appraisals of his theory by other sociologists. Therefore, it's worth looking here at these evaluations in some detail.

IV. Criticisms of Simmel's sociology of forms and their limitations

Part of the problematic understanding of Simmel's social theory is due to the fact that its epistemological consequences were either ignored or they were not properly interpreted. In both cases the result was that Simmel remained marginal in classical sociology, the best representatives of which are still regarded as being Marx, Weber and Durkheim. One obviously does not question here the impact which all three thinkers had for sociology. The problem is that, considering the development of sociology since that time we are confronted with the paradoxical fact that it still faces the epistemological problems which Simmel had identified decades ago.

We ought thus to return to inadequacies in early explanations of Simmel's theoretic approach, which have played a significant role in the dissemination of the so-called "formal sociology". Although few interpreters of Simmel's sociology warned sociologists against the misconception of regarding Simmel as a formalist, none - with the exception of Mamelet - was willing to address the issue from a relativistic perspective for reasons which I have already indicated. Tenbruck for example, despite emphasizing the notion of reciprocity in Simmel's sociology fails to conceive their heuristic character and remains entangled in the conventional interpretation, namely that of "formal sociology". Weingartner's interpretation although more complete than Tenbruck's, since it places the form-content dichotomy within the Kantian thought, the notion of experience and *lebensphilosophie* , is hesitant in making relativism the reference point from which the rest of Simmel's thought follows. Pitirim Sorokin has provided perhaps the fiercest polemic against Simmel's "formalistic" method. His critical approach is based on five parameters : firstly, regarding the novelty of the formalistic school ; secondly, regarding the dualism of form-content itself ; thirdly, regarding the claim of the school that social forms are exclusively studied by sociology ; fourthly, regarding the clarity and the commitment with which formal sociologists treat the dualism of form and content ; and fifthly, regarding the claim that sociology can exist independently of the question as to the

methodological validity of social forms.⁶⁰ Briefly stated, Sorokin criticizes the formalistic school of sociology (Tönnies, Simmel, von Wiese, Vierkandt etc.) on the grounds that it is based on a spurious distinction (i.e. form-content) and that it has been virtually "fruitless" for sociology as a science, its only contribution being the fact that it pointed to the need for classification of the various aspects of human behavior.⁶¹ Furthermore, he seeks to uncover the contradictory essence of "formal sociology" in its relation to sociology as being a scientifically systematic enterprise. One need only look at the five parameters of his attack in order to understand the falsity of his argument. Regarding the first, little should be said here. The fact that the form-content problem has been located as a subject of Roman law in antiquity, as Sorokin so persuasively argues, does not mean that it hasn't been given a new dimension through the sociological angle which Simmel attempted to provide. Nor does the fact that numerous philosophers dealt with it, indicates anything problematic in Simmel's treatment since by the same token Nietzsche's philosophy would collapse, since it was partially anticipated by Heraclitus. The second objection by Sorokin, although at first glance more sophisticated and to the point, proves to be equally deficient. According to his claim the dualism of form and content is "fallacious or represents something on which it is impossible to build sociology as a special science".⁶² This is so, according to Sorokin, because Simmel hasn't really provided a clearcut definition of form and content. But Simmel's definitions provide problems only if one is prepared to accept the dualism as a paradigmatic framework for sociology, devoid of any contradictions. Simmel proceeded with the dualism on the assumption that it is occasionally contradictory and problematic, but that it is intrinsic to the process of abstraction of elements from reality and therefore necessary for sociology as well.

The remaining of Sorokin's criticisms rest again on false presuppositions and unfounded assertions. For example, Simmel's assumption that social forms are exclusively studied by sociology is supposedly refuted by Sorokin through the fact that law has been dealing with this subject long before the formalistic school in sociology.⁶³ The constant comparison between law and sociology obfuscates what is the real aim of the Simmelian sociology of forms, which is no other than forms being used as a heuristic principle, an ideal construction for the understanding of society. What also escapes Sorokin's attention, is the fact that Simmel distinguished between three types of

⁶⁰ Sorokin (1928 : 495-496)

⁶¹ See *ibid.*: 495-507, but especially : 499-500

⁶² *ibid.* : 495

⁶³ *ibid.* : 499

sociology, the other two being "general" and "philosophical" sociology. This reflects to a certain extent another point of Sorokin's main dissatisfaction with Simmel, namely the fact he and the rest of the "formalists", "do not keep to their principles", appear contradictory in their assertions and "interpret the same terms in quite different senses".⁶⁴ Here, Sorokin fails to grasp the notion of reciprocity and relativism as *positive* presuppositions for social science.⁶⁵ As a very striking case of the errors which Sorokin makes in his evaluation, is the fact that he sees the formalistic study as being a study of the forms *per se* irrespectively of the content, as if one could isolate the form from the content and deal with them independently neglecting the fact that for Simmel the two exist in a reciprocal relationship. These problems in Sorokin's appraisal of Simmel's attempt to build a sociology of forms reflect the former's general worldview about sociology. Clearly, Sorokin dismisses Simmel's venture on the grounds that it is proto-scientific since it is "still in the stage of a purely philosophical or speculative sociology"⁶⁶ as if philosophy and hypothetical speculation form the pre-paradigmatic stage of a scientifically based sociology. For Sorokin, "Simmel's method lacks entirely either experimental approach, quantitative investigation, or any systematic factual study" of the social phenomena he examines, adding that it is only Simmel's talent which "compensates for lack of scientific methodology".⁶⁷ This excessively empiricist attitude accounts for the conservatism which has characterized American sociology since that time, and is part of the more general modern tendency which has affected sociological knowledge as well, namely the preponderance of means over ends. When belief in the adequacy of "scientific method" - or any method - becomes a dogma, then failure is imputed to any other course of sociological explanation no matter what its real claim to accuracy or successful explanation is.

I have already pointed out that the attempt to provide sociology with a classificatory means for analyzing the social world, was by no means the effort of a single sociologist. Apart from Simmel, one can also recall Weber's formulation of "ideal types", and Scheler's quest for a typological sociology. Both theorists although emphasizing the

⁶⁴ *ibid.* : 495

⁶⁵ "...*regressus in infinitum* is the completely legitimate expression for the [...] incompleteness of our knowledge. Expressed in Kantian terms : instead of two constitutive and, as such, irreconcilable principles **we obtain two regulative ones, each of which forms the basis of the other.** Thus, what we are concerned with is not a mechanical mixture or an eclectic compromise of opposed methods but with applying both of them **as alternating levels** of a *single* comprehensive methodology."([italics in the original; emphasis added] Simmel in Frisby, 1981 : 49-50). Similarly, form and content are characterized by the same type of relation, namely reciprocity. Accordingly this qualification of this epistemological dualism reflects also on the kind of sociological scrutiny which uses this dualism as a method.

⁶⁶ Sorokin (1928 : 502)

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

descriptive aspect of sociology nevertheless sought to establish a framework of sociological analysis that would be based on the regularities which certain phenomena exhibit in space and time. Weber's interpretive sociology stated unequivocally the need for abstraction and generalization via "ideal types", while Scheler's sociology of knowledge with its task of grasping actors' group experiences also called for ideal types.⁶⁸ Simmel's position entails traits which appear in Weber and Scheler, but considering the methodological problems of schemata such as forms and types, it seeks to incorporate them in the dualism rather than to surpass them. Weber's and Scheler's theoretic propositions take for granted the negative character of relativism and attempt to escape it. However, in their typologies, especially Scheler's, there are residues of the kind of relativism they tried to eliminate. Simmel by taking relativism as being positive for sociological interpretation, builds the form-content dualism on the basis of this criterion ; the inconsistency of the form-content construct which several commentators have observed, can only be sustained if relativism is taken as being extrinsic to the dualism.

In this purely methodological realm, therefore, one senses vividly the critical tone which most sociologists had when dealing with Simmel. The case of Karl Mannheim is a particularly interesting one, and it's worth looking at it in some detail. In the last sections of *Ideology and Utopia* , Mannheim seeks to juxtapose the novelty of his sociology of knowledge and relationism against former types of sociological theory including also "formal sociology".⁶⁹ For Mannheim then, the problem resides on what it seems to be the very foundation of knowledge, namely its "broadening basis"⁷⁰, which eventually leads towards abstraction. From this presupposition onwards, there follows a set of assumptions which according to Mannheim proves sufficient in demonstrating the limitations of "formal sociology". Let us therefore see more closely whether these assumptions fit together and whether they apply to what Simmel had conceived as an adequate methodological framework for sociology.

Mannheim's first point is twofold. It pertains to the main process of the formalizing tendency and it is stated as follows :

In its first stage, this tendency neutralizes the various conflicting points of view (i.e. deprives them of their absolute character) ; in its

⁶⁸ Scheler (1992 : 202)

⁶⁹ Mannheim does not refer to Simmel explicitly. However, it is Simmel's theory which is challenged here since the particular example which Mannheim draws belong exclusively to Simmel. Also, one should note that a similar attack - this time explicitly against Simmel - was launched by Mannheim in his "Structures of Thinking" (1982).

⁷⁰ Mannheim (1936 : 302)

second stage, it creates out of this neutralization a more comprehensive and serviceable basis of vision. (Mannheim 1936:302)

Clearly what is of interest to us here is the first part of the argument. Mannheim suggests that the process of abstraction, which is intrinsic to any intellectual encounter with the world, results in the neglect and exclusion of certain aspects of the phenomenon under scrutiny, i.e. it causes distortion. Mannheim is assuming that the formalizing process, in order to build a more comprehensive view, relies on characteristics which share more or less the same qualities. Whatever deviates from this pattern is seen by the formalist as *anomaly*, and consequently is ignored and excluded from any further consideration. In its course, "the formalizing tendency" reduces to a "subordinate position the analysis of the concrete qualitative" aspects of a phenomenon, and replaces them with a "functional view modelled after a purely mechanical pattern".⁷¹ From this one must conclude that the analysis of microsociological phenomena is sacrificed by the formalist, for the sake of abstract, macrosociological observations which eventually give only a partial or even distorted picture of reality. Formal principles operate only at the expense of other, equally important facets of one and the same problem. But this statement proves, as we shall see shortly, detrimental to the plausibility of Mannheim's argument, since a formal explanation is not necessarily connected with either a functionalist or a mechanical mode of operation. Nevertheless the alleged consequence of this process of abstraction is that

[...] in the end it sees only a formal mechanism in operation. Thus, to cite an illustration from formal sociology, domination is a category which can only be abstracted from the concrete positions of the persons involved (i.e. the dominator and the dominated), because it contents itself with emphasizing the structural interrelationship [...] of the behaviour involved in the process of interaction. This it does by operating with concepts like sub- and super-ordination, force, obedience, subjectibility, etc. (Mannheim 1936: 303)

The particular example which Mannheim uses here, is taken from Simmel's analysis of forms of domination in the interactive process. Mannheim's call for a microsociological approach is reiterated through the introduction of the idea of meaningful interpretation. In what may be regarded as an essentially vitalistic attitude, Mannheim points to the problematic nature of any fixed formula which aims at enclosing within its periphery elements of reality. Therefore, a complete presentation and explanation of a social phenomenon such as domination for example, can only materialize if one takes into account the very primary elements of the interactive process itself, namely the mental

⁷¹ Ibid.

contents of the two or more agents who are involved in the process. Only by being able to extract and then to assess each of the participants' experiences and evaluation of them, then one might be said to arrive at an adequate sociological explanation, which stands above the functional/structural mechanism which the formalist sees as being at work.⁷² The critique culminates with Mannheim's appeal to the factor of complexity, maintaining that

The most elementary facts in the social sphere surpass in complexity the purely formal relations, and they can only be understood in referring to qualitative contents and meanings. (Mannheim 1936: 303)

Although this is indeed a valid point, the way it is employed here obscures its real meaning and aim. Complexity is undoubtedly an issue for sociology, and in fact as we shall see in the course of the argument, it was Simmel who included it with serious consideration in his attempt to interpret social interaction.

Similar objections are raised towards other well-known aspects of Simmel's work which can be regarded as products of his sociology of forms. For example, Mannheim argues against the construction of types, like Simmel's "the stranger"⁷³, which seem to neglect the socio-cultural locale within which the conditions arise for the realization of such a type or form. It is essentially an argument against the kind of sociological theorizing which aims at the creation of *absolute* explanatory formulae for the understanding of society, but it still remains a paradoxical fact that it was used to undermine Simmel's sociology.

The reason for this systematic treatment of Mannheim's argument lies on the fact that it contains as pivotal points for its criticism, all the assumptions which Simmel had used in some form or another, in order to clarify the very problematic nature of the form - content dichotomy, but also in order to demonstrate the necessity of this dualism as an epistemological guideline in sociology. In what follows, I shall try to elicit some

⁷² An explanation might be adequately represented "only if the dominated as well as the dominator were to tell what their experiences actually were in the situations in which they live." (Mannheim, 1936 : 303). This argument seems to be raising questions as to : a) the distinctive character of sociological research which according to Mannheim's argument seems to be relegated to purely descriptive purposes, or b) the rise of a relativism which Mannheim sought to eliminate from sociological explanation. However, it eliminates the notion of "privileged observer", therefore eliminates the role of sociologist as a critical analyst by reducing him to a mere recorder of experiences. Both consequences seem to be residues of the attempt of Mannheim - and Scheler to a certain extent - to dissociate themselves from relativism. In the striking case of Mannheim, who seems to be less sceptical as to the effectiveness of his attempt to eliminate relativism than Simmel was in his own attempt for example, to reformulate the whole concept of relativism rather than abandon it, relativistic arguments crop up continuously either in the form of perspectivism, cultural relativism, individualism and relationism.

⁷³ *ibid.* : 304-305

counter-arguments in relation to Mannheim's critical stand towards the sociology of forms, taken mainly from the corpus of Simmel's work, and often given through the prism of reciprocity and relationism.

The most suitable starting point is the process of abstraction and neutralization, which as we have seen consists the main postulate in Mannheim's conception of the formalistic method. It is an issue which lies at the core of epistemology and methodology of both the natural and the social sciences, and it obviously cannot even be adequately sketched within the scope of the present study. My attempt though aims at elucidating those points which intersect in the argument of both thinkers and as such it is necessarily simplified and limited but still, I hope, pertinent to the particular debate.

At the core of Mannheim's criticism lies an important question as to the nature of the formalistic process. It seems that Mannheim's dissatisfaction with the way this type of knowledge expands, applies to the *only* way known to us, as to how man encounters the world and how he interprets it.⁷⁴ Man's confrontation with the "unknown" can only progress through the identification of certain regularities in the life-process, and their classification into types. Obviously during this process certain elements are bound to be excluded from being identified and consequently from being allocated to symbolic and linguistic schemata. This is of course not a new assertion. But it is useful to keep in mind this very basic and incontestable fact, since it is this fact that Simmel returns to in order to stress the idiosyncratic nature of the dualism of form and content. Mannheim's anxiety as to the exclusion or the subordination of certain elements or perspectives by the formalistic process is justified only up to a point. It is valid only if seen within an ideal framework of sociological interpretation whereby the sociologist will be able to incorporate his own situational-conditioned position within a widely accepted framework of explanation. It is understandable, from Mannheim's exposition, that there is a more general tendency which is critically scrutinized here ; that of absolutism in relation to truth.⁷⁵ The implicit assertion though that Simmel's theory of forms is part of it presupposes assumptions arbitrarily attributed to Simmel. For example, Mannheim insists that the only criterion for explanation is, under the aspect of formalism, the "formal mechanism" at work. This reification of form as a methodological postulate is in fierce

⁷⁴In his "Structures of Thinking", Mannheim reduces the formalist type of researcher to someone "whose interest is only attracted by unity within diversity" (1982 : 102). But, for Simmel this is not the case : unity as well as diversity are states which are sought by the mind in cases where understanding is either too systematized and unified so that detailed observation becomes thwarted by the homogeneous character of that particular interpretation, or where understanding is incapable of being objectified or better, classified in types due to the diversity of the elements of reality. This relates to Mannheim's criticism which reifies unity whereas for Simmel formal unity is a preliminary and not ultimate stage.

⁷⁵ Mannheim (1936 : 305)

opposition with the reciprocal effect which Simmel applied to it. Additionally, Simmel saw the notion of form in sociology as a method which could provide description and explanation only to a limited sphere of phenomena. In fact, for Simmel, the limitation of form used as a method, is pointed out by the fact that

In every single social-historical configuration, there operates a number of reciprocities among the elements, which can probably never be wholly enumerated. We can no more dissolve its form, as it is given, into its component factors, and then recombine these factors [...] (Simmel 1950: 200)

The problem therefore according to Simmel was to establish some sort of regularity of phenomena of social action out of the *chaotically complex order* of the social world, on the assumption that these patterns or forms were neither exhaustive nor definitive. In this, he is superior to both Bergson and Mannheim, since they failed to see to full extent the consequences of their negation of *form*, the former as a property of intelligence, and the latter as a partial but useful methodological orientation.

Another issue which is raised in Mannheim's criticism, pertains to the fact that in deciphering a relationship of interaction, the formalist does not take into account the participants' assessments and interpretation of their own action. The fact, as he puts it, that the dominator and the dominated in a social relationship which involves super- and sub-ordination, are not able to communicate the validation of their own action to the formalist presents a difficulty for an adequate explanation of this particular phenomenon. One of the main objections to what Mannheim sees as a problem, stems from the vital methodological questions which undermine this very position which he presents as counter-argument. To what extent therefore, can the dominated and the dominator give an assessment of their relationship to each other, that would meet the sociologists' hypothesis? Is the actor's "testimony" able to validate or refute the sociologist's hypothesis, or is the hypothesis itself a product of the actor's judgement of his own action(s)? Simmel although conscious of the problem⁷⁶ identified a more promising albeit complicated, framework for sociological analysis. His theory of forms reflects nothing other than the hypothesis which claims that there *must* be specific ways by which individuals act with each other. These particular *ways* or *forms* might not be permanent, but they must be *forms* which appear in some periodicity in space and time that is appropriate in duration, so that they can be identified and studied by the sociologist. This process of identification of traits which appear in disparate time-space locations does not

⁷⁶ Simmel's writings on the philosophy of history and the problem of interpretation, attest to that. See Simmel(1977, 1980).

necessarily imply a nomological framework of explanation, although one should stress here that they might be used as the primary basis for the development of law-like observations.⁷⁷ Again, Simmel's analysis of domination provides a suitable example. He sees for example, a relationship where the individual is subjected to the authority of another factor which may be, as he illustrates, either another individual, a principle or an object.⁷⁸ Despite therefore the distinctive features which are undoubtedly present in each of these cases of subordination, there must be characteristics which cause the sociologist to classify those three forms of relationship under a particular category. So, the person A, who is submissive to a charismatic personality, the person B, who follows with unquestionable obedience the dictum of law, or the person C, who is entirely devoted to money, share one thing in common : the form of dependency or subordination on a type of authority. The contents of this particular type of authority manifest themselves differently in all these cases ; but the particular way by which the three persons' behavior is structured in relation to these types of authority is fundamentally similar. At this stage and in order to discover the specific mechanism in operation through which these three relationships materialize, the self-validation of persons' A, B, C actions is of secondary importance. The motives, reasons and justifications which these persons provide are of major significance only as indicators for understanding the purpose of the action. But as data which account for the identification of a certain pattern of interaction, they seem to be of little help to the sociologist who is engaged in the first, formal stage of explanation of social phenomena. Simmel never really implied that this is the ultimate stage of adequate explanation. He simply delineated some boundaries within which forms of sociation could be discernible and be interpreted exclusively from sociology, whereas beneath the mere formal operation they may lie psychological or even biological reasons which have caused a particular individual to enter a specific form of interaction.

But these are not the only objections to the formalistic attitude of Simmel, raised by Mannheim. They are based on an argument which at first glance is relativistic, but which in the hands of Mannheim becomes the tool of an absolutist. He then, brings up the following point :

If another age had attempted a formal systematization of the types of conduct, it would no doubt have arrived at quite another typology. In another historical situation, different abstractions would have been

⁷⁷ The issue of the "complexity" of the social world in relation to the possibility of nomological axioms applicable to the study of society has been of paramount importance in sociological debates. In the context of Simmel's "forms", Kaern observes that "the variable which makes general laws in the social sciences impossible is 'complexity'"(Kaern,1986 : 61).

⁷⁸ I refer here to the first two sections of Chapter 4 : " Subordination under a Principle", in Simmel(1950 : 250-254)

found and singled out from the total complex of events. (Mannheim 1936: 304)

This assertion which suggests pure historical relativism, would have been valid only had the basic presuppositions underlying Simmel's so-called formalistic approach been radically different. In other words, it would have been sound only if Simmel's forms entailed or required absolute typologies, which as I have indicated earlier on in this chapter, was far from being Simmel's purpose. The assumption as to the validity or existence of types of human sociation is precisely accepted by Simmel as being relative, and this is apparent from the fact that these types are subject to transformation, during the course of the life-process. Although forms once created are permanent, the typology which emanates from the need to classify phenomena which exhibit the same form of sociation, its manifestation so to speak, may indeed be relative and subject to the peculiarities of a specific socio-historical context. It is perhaps Mannheim's notion of incommensurability between the life-worlds of different societies in space and time, which does not do justice to the Simmelian formulation of the dualism of form and content. It is actually the intersection of aspects of diverse cultural locales which renders the very conception of a formalistic approach feasible.

Concluding the discussion on Mannheim's treatment of Simmelian theory, one should mention the main point which is absent from the former's critique. Had it been included it would perhaps have resulted less in a critique of Simmel's methodology than a celebration of it. Again, the crux of Mannheim's attack is that the form operates as an explanatory framework at the expense of content. Simmel's own formulations though, turn us away from such a possibility. In one of his multiple analyses of forms of interaction, namely faithfulness and gratitude, Simmel outlines at a general level the substance of his theory and reasoning:

[...] a basic dualism [...] pervades the fundamental form of all sociation. The dualism consists in the fact that a relation, which is a fluctuating, constantly developing life-process, nevertheless receives a relatively stable external form. The sociological forms of reciprocal behavior, of unification, of presentation toward the outside, cannot follow, with any precise adaptation, the changes of their inside, that is, of the processes that occur in the individual in regard to the other. These two layers, relation and form, have different tempi of development ; or it often is the nature of the external form not to develop properly at all. (Simmel 1950: 385)

The emphasis here on the dynamic, unconditional and unforeseen evolution or transformation of content in juxtaposition with the much slower development and refinement of form, gives rise to the lag between content and form that obviously in its

turn raises questions as to the adequacy of form as perennially satisfactory representation of content. If Simmel had proceeded by denying the lag between the two factors of the dualism, then Mannheim's criticism would have hit its target. In fact, considering this condition of the dualism of form and content, one may even assert that to a certain extent Simmel and Mannheim converge in their hypotheses. The essentially vitalistic thread which permeates Simmel's work and in the case at hand appears as the incapacity of form to adapt to "the vibrating life" and to the reciprocity of any relation⁷⁹, appears in a covert form in Mannheim's introductory statements in his elaboration of the sociology of knowledge.⁸⁰ What Mannheim failed to see in Simmel, and this is indeed puzzling since much of the former's argumentation contains the fundamentals of the latter, is the discrepancy characterizing the dualism of content and form. Even more important is the inevitability or indeed, the *necessity* of ascribing form to matter. Considering this assumption, the purely methodological debate is transferred for a moment onto the most profound level of epistemological inquiry. Simmel's claim that life becomes enclosed in "formulas and fixed directions", i.e. forms, is fully accepted by both Mannheim and Bergson. What distinguishes Simmel is the fact that life enriches form through experience. Form is not static and *a priori* but dynamic and determinable. Regardless of Simmel's application of the dualism, e.g. aesthetics, methodology, culture etc, the conclusion one is tempted to reach might be expressed as follows :

[...] even if, in fortunate cases, the fixed external form constitutes the center of gravity or indifference above and below which our life evenly oscillates ; there still remains the fundamental, formal contrast between the essential flux and movement of the subjective psychic life and the limitations of its forms. These forms, after all **do not express or shape an ideal, a contrast with life's reality, but this life itself.** ([Emphasis added] Simmel 1950: 386)

Here one should also point to the fact that a similar argument is developed in Simmel's discussion of relativism. As we shall see in the next chapter, Simmel builds a theoretical framework analogous to this one, whereby relativism does not detach from reality its absoluteness, but rather transforms this absoluteness into a *relation* . If we attempt to translate this notion into the language of Simmel's theory of forms, one would be led to the assertion that forms do not really enclose and possibly debase (and this actually corresponds to Bergson's view), the immanent significance of content, but rather it is through forms that contents acquire any significance at all.

⁷⁹ Ibid. : 385

⁸⁰ See Mannheim (1936), especially chapter 1, : 1-54

The problematic reception of Simmel's theory of forms as part of a relativistic epistemology has resulted into their elevation to a nomological status. This confused interpretation is reflected for example in Peter Winch's *The Idea of Social Science*. In the concluding pages of the book, he cautions the reader against the exclusive claim to explanation by sociological laws, by using an example from Simmel's essays on conflict. From Simmel's discussion on similarities between Roman Catholicism and Old Catholicism, Winch understands that

The "sociological law" may be helpful in calling one's attention to features of historical situations which one might otherwise have overlooked and in suggesting useful analogies [...] But no historical situation can be understood simply by "applying" such laws, as one applies laws to particular occurrences in natural science. (Winch 1990: 135-136)

The puzzling element in this interpretation stems from two misjudgements. Firstly, Winch interprets "forms" as application of sociological laws, but as I have already indicated, this is opposite to what Simmel actually suggested. Forms serve precisely the function that Winch finds useful, namely as analogical statements. The fact that these comparative analogies may prove fruitful for the construction of laws, is absent from Simmel's thought. Secondly, Simmel was very cautious or even sceptical as to the explanatory efficacy of forms; he often juxtaposed form and content in order to highlight the methodological difficulties intrinsic in the dualism. Additionally, Winch's dissatisfaction with the theory of forms is reminiscent of Mannheim's in the sense that they both presented historical relativism as a counter-argument. Winch misunderstands here the fact that Simmel tries to discover the operation mechanism of a constellation of individuals, who happen to form a religious institution, rather than explain the historical situation *per se* within which this particular set of activities falls. Simmel does not argue that a formal explanation is a *sine qua non* of the proper understanding of a historical era. Neither does he argue, and here we enter Mannheim's territory, that the construction of forms should inhibit the social researcher from proceeding further with sociological analysis by ascertaining the actors' experiences. One does not sacrifice here the autonomous and indissoluble unity of subjective contents. One simply, tries to outline the steps which precede this difficult task, by looking at the constellation of mutual interactive relations between the individual units, that is, the way this mutuality becomes objectified in concrete form.

V. Conclusion

The ambivalence of the position which Mannheim and Winch have criticized is more acutely described by Simmel himself. In what could appear as unwarranted scepticism, he explains how via "rule-following relationships" one builds the system of patterned regularities of events ; at the same time he alerts the reader as to the dangers such an explanation could yield if it is uncritically stated :

If we did not assume general conditions, universal drives and regular series of effects as a basis for specific cases, there would not be any historical explanation at all ; the whole would disintegrate into a chaos of atomized events. One may admit, nevertheless, that the universal regularities, which make the connection between the specific state or event possible, depend in turn upon higher laws, so that they themselves are valid only as historical combinations [...] (Simmel 1978: 113)

This functional imperative which underlines the categories of form and content manifests itself as perhaps the only *a priori* in the whole of Simmel's sociology. Recapturing the main line of argumentation in this re-appraisal of Simmel's sociology of forms we ought to maintain some crucial points :

- a)the departure of Simmel from Kant through the notion of reciprocity between forms and experience.
- b)the dissolution of all *a priori* to the flux of life (*lebensphilosophie*).
- c)the assymetry between form and content which may lead to form overtaking content. The epistemological implication is that form cannot always be an adequate explanatory category.
- d)Form is a heuristic principle ; it does not refer to a conclusive or definitive type of explanation, but operates as the pivotal point for further more detailed, phenomenological scrutiny of social life.
- e)Form and content are relative notions. Simmel identifies perspectivism and historicism as possible sources for this relativity.
- f)This relativity does not denote explanatory or evaluative failure. It is simply the manifestation of relationism which is itself the only criterion for determining qualitative distinction between forms.⁸¹

⁸¹ In a cryptic but significant for our purposes claim, Simmel points to relationism regarding form and content : "The borderline at which the development of specific life-contents passes from its natural form into its cultural form is indistinct and is subject to controversy. But this is merely one of the most universal difficulties of thought. The categories under which specific phenomena are subsumed in order to incorporate them into knowledge, its norms and relationships, are marked off from each other and often

Setting aside some of these parameters, which are subject of further scrutiny in the following chapters, the immediate consequence of the dualism appears to be its functionality : the fact that the construction of forms in the study of society denotes only a preliminary and general *stage* of explanation and not a formalistic - in the conventional terminology - , definitive method of sociological explanation.

gain their meaning **only from this contrast.** "([Emphasis added] Simmel, 1978 : 447-448)

Chapter 2 : Relationism

I. Introduction

We have seen from the discussion of Simmel's epistemological theory, that various forms of relativism permeate his vast work. The implications of this dominant presence of relativism with its ramifications, have resulted in misinterpretations as to Simmel's actual epistemology and its orientation towards the idea of truth. These problems in the evaluation and classification of Simmel's epistemology, are not entirely new symptoms of the confusion and prejudice which surround the understanding of the concept of relativism. As I shall demonstrate at a later stage of this chapter, the debate as to the validity of relativistic doctrines in social science can be traced back to the times during which Simmel was writing. It is almost certain that the debate must have been taking place for quite sometime before Simmel, since his formulation of relativism which seems to have evolved out of fierce criticisms of the doctrine, has a purely defensive and persuasive character. In fact it is even directed towards well-known arguments which attempt to demonstrate the fallacious and contradictory essence of relativism (i.e. the case of the underdetermination thesis).

My purpose in the present discussion is neither to fully evaluate nor to completely justify Simmel's theory of relativism (or better, relationism, since it is this particular and actually quite distinctive form of relativism which is our subject here). This is going to be attempted at a later stage, when I shall try to incorporate relationism and relativism in general, into Simmel's theory of culture and modernity. In this chapter, I simply try to expose the distinctive characteristics of relationism, characteristics which have to be systematically clarified in order to show the, at first glance subtle, but ultimately fundamental structural difference between this epistemological doctrine and its generator, namely relativism.

Simmel in his defence of relativism, chose to associate himself with prevalent names from natural science such as Albert Einstein and Max Von Laue. For this reason, I feel that a preliminary section on the notion of relativity in natural science is necessary to illuminate Simmel's affiliation with the theories of the aforementioned thinkers. I should caution the reader that my knowledge of natural scientific conceptions of relativism is very elementary. I simply try to use natural science as a general informative-analogical context in order to see whether there is a genuine parallel to Simmel's theory of relativism. It is worth adding here that in this section I will highlight also the general philosophical implications of the scientific conception of relativity. Its consequences are evident in both

relationism and relativism in their philosophical formulations. This section will be followed by the main discussion of relationism, which will almost exclusively be focused on a particular section from Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money*, where he embarks on a lucid but stylistically defensive analysis of it. A partial appraisal of his relativistic theory therefore will then be attempted in the last section of this chapter which examines its affinities with Mannheim's relationism elaborated in his *Ideology and Utopia*. Since I am employing here epistemological concepts which are mostly distinguished by subtle differences, there is clearly the danger of misrepresentations and misunderstandings. I will therefore try very briefly to identify with as much clarity as possible, the auxiliary tools of our analysis. This identification is necessary, since as I try to demonstrate, it was confusion over Simmel's relativism which has led to the more or less atrophied versions of his epistemology uncritically accepted by the sociological community.

II. Relationism and Natural Science

The fundamental concepts of the analysis are : "relativism", "relativity" and "relationism". All three of them, although often substantially different, nevertheless exhibit similar presuppositions which point to their potential interrelatedness. The motif of our discussion embraces, to different degrees of course, these three epistemological concepts, all of which are utilized by Simmel in his ambitious attempt to "free" relativism from the negative connotations with which it had hitherto been associated, as well as making clear the vivid distinctions which differentiate relativism from doctrines such as skepticism, agnosticism or irrationalism. This was an extremely difficult task, in both its aim and procedure, for it required challenging firmly rooted assumptions on that matter. We shall see in a moment how difficult it was, for example, for Heinrich Rickert to distinguish between relativism and skepticism.

When using the term "relativism" I actually refer to this general epistemological principle which locates the validity of any criteria of truth within a (usually socially) limited space. The implication of this is that knowledge claims are held to be universally non-applicable, since they occur and evolve within specific spatio-temporal contexts. For the moment let us take for granted this crude definition of relativism, which as Hollis and Lukes assert extends in various channels of social life in the form of moral, historical, cultural, scientific relativism ; or even a relativism which "undermines" concepts such as reason or truth.⁸² It is actually through the notions of relativity and relationism the way

⁸² See Hollis and Lukes' "Introduction" in Hollis and Lukes' "Rationality and Relativism" (1990).

they are formulated by Simmel, that could help us in coming to terms with what is not widely accepted as being the case, namely that relativism is not detrimental to knowledge but rather an essential feature of it. The letter of Simmel to Rickert in 1917 points to that direction :

[...] I think you suspect me of secretly being a skeptic, which is totally untrue. Of course, what is usually meant by relativism is not much more than platitudes such as these : all truths are relative, in other words, they may be false ; all moral standards are relative, in other words, they may have different contents some place else.

My kind of relativism constitutes a perfectly positive metaphysical worldview and **it is as much scepticism as is relativism in physics as it is represented by Einstein and Laue.**

Obviously I have not made clear what I mean when I say that truth is relative.

Relativity of truth does not mean to me that truth and untruth are co-relational ; but rather, I mean that **truth is a relation of contents.**

Neither of the contents is true in itself, just as no physical object is heavy by itself but only in a **reciprocal relation** (Wechselverhältnis) with another. ([Emphasis added]Simmel in Kaern et al. 1990: 78-79)

It is actually this substantial positive interpretation of relativism which departs radically from conventional definitions. Reciprocity, which is the quintessence of relationism, communicates more adequately according to Simmel not only the actual meaning of relativism, but more ambitiously, the essence of truth. Simmel analyzes extensively these assertions in a section in *The Philosophy of Money*, to be discussed later in this chapter. For the moment let us pay attention to the analogy Simmel makes with Einstein and Laue. Evidently, Simmel rejects scepticism as a label for his theory, for the reason that it does not break away with established but ultimately obsolete categories. Simmel clearly saw the danger of reducing knowledge via scepticism and conventional relativism, to a form of extreme subjectivism. Although one would hardly deny that scepticism forms the backbone of relativism, or at least its elementary starting-point, it is a totally different thing to assert that the two attitudes towards the world, are identical. Simmel builds his whole relativistic system on the basis of avoiding this confusion, despite the fact that in his vast and plethoric work, one encounters often scepticism and relativism in its what I would call conventional form. The positive breakthrough which he initiates - that is, to ascribe to a doctrine which is widely conceived as negative and destructive, a positive basis and essence - seems to him analogical with the achievement of Einstein's relativity theory in physics. What Simmel actually says is, that it is a mistake to regard his positively oriented relativistic theory as scepticism, similar to the mistake of regarding Einstein's relativity theory as relativistic - in the conventional sense, which Simmel in the



first paragraph of his letter, clearly repudiates. Relationism, which is Simmel's alternative, should therefore be examined in order to see whether it truly embodies a positive disposition towards knowledge or the idea of truth. However, it seems here necessary, to comment briefly on similar ideas in natural science - mainly physics - which, as Simmel shows, played some role in his formulation of relationism.

Although Simmel does not refer to him at all, it seems that the physicist Ernst Mach (1838-1916) came close to what might have been an inspiration for the work of the German sociologist and philosopher. Pointing at the deficiencies in Newton's conception of time, space and motion, Mach in his *The Science of Mechanics* asserts that :

All masses and all velocities, and consequently all forces, are relative. There is no decision about relative and absolute which we can possibly meet, to which we are forced, or from which we can obtain any intellectual or other advantage. (Mach in Williams 1968: 18)

In the same manner, Mach claims that "we have knowledge only of *relative* spaces and motions".⁸³

The significance of Mach's views in his philosophical treatment of physics, is in relation to Simmel's views, only implicit. However, the ideas of dependency between various elements in the cosmos or of the element which is qualitatively determined *only* through combinations or relations, are inextricably linked with Simmel's relationism, and are reminiscent of arguments in the work of Mach. To be sure, if not for anything else the affinity between the two thinkers lies on their bold attempts to provide wide points of intersection between philosophy and their own particular areas of interest (sociology for Simmel, physics for Mach), as well as to reconcile or rather establish intuition as a valid or rather *possible* methodological tool.

For Mach, the demonstration of dependence relationships, which presupposes decomposition of things into relations, has the function of completing rather than dissolving of whatever we call "things" or "objects of experience". But more importantly, what counts in Mach's thought is his attitude towards science. His and Simmel's sound remarkably similar. Mach challenges the scientific community with statements such as:

Our elements are thus only provisional, **as those of alchemy were in the past and those of currently accepted chemistry are now.** Although for our purpose of eliminating philosophical sham problems reduction to these elements seemed the best way, it does not follow that every scientific enquiry must begin with them. ([Emphasis added] Mach 1976: 12)

⁸³ Mach in Williams, (1968: 21)

This approach is also encountered in the work of Simmel :

How much medieval man "knew", and the enlightened thinker of the eighteenth century or the materialistic scientific researcher of the nineteenth, which for us is either completely obsolete or at least dubious. How much of that which is now undoubted "knowledge" will suffer the same fate sooner or later!" (Simmel in Lukács 1980: 445)

This aversion to "absoluteness" which characterizes also the works of Mach, Einstein and Laue, is closely linked with the not accidental evolution of the various relativistic versions at that time, which were to be found in both the *Natur-* and the *Geisteswissenschaften*. What is interesting is the : a) attempt to escape not only from the epistemological-metaphysical idea of "absoluteness", but also from the trenchant alternative of relativism, through the novel concept of relationism, and b) the attention with which social philosophers received analogous developments in the natural sciences, and attempted to utilize them. The impact of scientific developments in the thought of Simmel is overtly detectable:

That the apparent stability of the earth is not only a complicated movement, but that its position in the universe is established by a **mutual relationship** to other masses of matter, is a very simple but striking case of the **transition from the stability and absoluteness of the world's contents to their dissolution into motions and relations**. ([Emphasis added] Simmel 1978: 103)

By emphasizing movement, Simmel does not deny constancy ; instead he is interested in showing the relation between the two notions, a relationship based on a functional determinacy. In this respect he is close to Mach. For Mach, the aim of scientific inquiry is "the discovery of *functional relations* " and "the dependence of experiences on one another" without reference to unknown variables or absolute factors.⁸⁴ The existence of an absolute perspective is denied by Mach who argues that "no point of view has absolute, permanent validity" but rather "has importance only for some given end".⁸⁵ The analogy with Simmel's perspectivism which is based on relationism is apparent, in the sense that both thinkers emphasize the expedient and purposive character of any action within a system of differentiated elements, beings, goals and methods. More importantly

⁸⁴ Mach (1959: 35, also : 16)

⁸⁵ Ibid.: 37

though, both give priority to the functional - and consequently relative - unity of constancy and flux. For Mach, "the constants of the man of science are not absolutely constant, nor, on the other hand, do the changes he investigates correspond to the limitless flux of Herakleitos".⁸⁶ For Simmel of course, constancy and flux are categories for the understanding of the world which exist in functional interdependence and account for the lawfulness and change that occurs in both the physical and social world. In this respect, it may be asserted that Simmel attempts to construct a sociological epistemology on the basis of modern physics ; his sociology of forms which accounts for particular structures that may remain constant over long periods of time while their contents or units from which they are formulated and held together change continuously. This type of functional relativism underlines Simmel's method.

Now, if Simmel here by the concept of content designates reality, which is probably the case, then one could assert that his formulation of relativism is close to Einstein's theory of relativity, or rather its philosophical impact. What is meant by this ? Einstein's formulation of the general theory of relativity evolved as a need to change Newton's equations and assumptions as to the nature of mechanics. It places for example, two events happening simultaneously within a given framework which is called a co-ordinate system. Observations and perspectives of a particular phenomenon occur within a particular co-ordinate system, that is, a body's movement, is uniform but relative to a chosen co-ordinate system. Accordingly, the perception of a body's trajectory is peculiar to the co-ordinate system within which the observer's perception takes place. So when an observer in location **A** asserts that event **a** precedes event **b** and when the observer in location **B** asserts that event **b** precedes event **a**, this does not mean that one of the perspectives is illusory, but rather that there is no absolute perspective of the event, or that in other words the relativity of perspectives corresponds to reality's quality which is to possess perspective. This view would be reduced to subjectivism only if our relative perspectives were seen as abstractions from one absolute reality. In this sense there is a striking similarity with Simmel's standpoint. Similarly, Simmel talks of the relativity of truth not as being compared with an "independent notion of truth" but rather as "the mode in which representations become truth..."⁸⁷ By retaining the normative substance of a particular system within which perceptions occur, Simmel does not raise any action-framework or co-ordinate system as superior to any other but he points to the valid manifestation of reality to any of those systems and the peculiar properties they embody. For him reality can be nothing other than relative in precisely this sense. It can be

⁸⁶ *ibid.*: 368

⁸⁷ Simmel (1978: 116)

perceived differently but validly by the particular observer. Looking at a particular example we read :

The sense perception that is true for the insect would obviously not be true for the eagle; this is because this perception, on the basis of which the insect acts properly in relation to inner and outer constellations, would move the eagle, in relation to his conditions, to unreasonable and destructive action. These perceptions do not lack normative stability; indeed, every perceiving being possesses a generally established "truth", which his representation may grasp or miss. (Simmel 1978: 107)

As I have stressed previously, the discussion will not engage in the definition and treatment of Einstein's relativity theory, but it will attempt to confront and analyze critically the philosophical premises which stem from it, and which have provided the basis for Simmel's reference to it.

The evaluation of Einstein theory of relativity has been problematic both inside and outside the boundaries of the physical science. Primarily, and this is actually what is of interest to us, because it was still confused with the relativism-subjectivism it sought to overcome. This was a problem of course because relativism was associated with the destruction of truth and objectivity, especially in the empiricism which prevailed in the United States during the 1950s. I by no means draw a comparison here between Einstein and Simmel as to the significance and impact of their discoveries. I simply try to stress the fact that the two theories have similarities in form and that their attempts within their particular paradigms had had affinities as to their aims but not as to their results or consequences. In social science, and in sociology in particular, the opposition to relativism was forceful since among the classical scholars only Simmel could be described thoroughly as a relativist. However within the natural scientific realm, the term - always in the form of relativity under Einstein and Laue - was not received without being misconstrued. Bertrand Russell, for example, points to the confusion which surrounds its reception. He presents evaluations of the theory which mistake it for Kantian subjectivism, or with unwarranted relativism, as being totally distorted.⁸⁸ Others, such as Max Born, locate the achievement of Einstein's relativity theory in "the relativization and objectivation of the conceptions of space and time".⁸⁹ For Bergson, who one should add, was not entirely sympathetic to Einstein's theory, the quintessence of this theory's

⁸⁸ "The [relativity] theory does not say that *everything* is relative ; on the contrary, it gives a technique for distinguishing what is relative from what belongs to a physical occurrence in its own right". (Russell, 1977 : 153)

⁸⁹ Born, (1924 : 6)

novelty lies on the fact that the *object* is replaced by a *relation*.⁹⁰

The Spanish philosopher, José Ortega y Gasset has also given an appraisal of the philosophical consequences of Einstein's theory. In fact his arguments are vividly reminiscent of Simmel's passage in *The Philosophy of Money* which deals with the replacement of "old relativism" with "relationism"⁹¹. Ortega y Gasset argues that to conceive of Einsteinian relativism as diametrically opposed to absolutism is a fundamentally wrong approach. The radical novelty of the theory lies on the fact that it is not directed against absolutism but that it actually reinforces it by granting to relativism an absolute validity. The argument then is as follows :

[Einstein's] physical science is not relative, but relativist, and achieves thanks to its relativism, an absolute significance. The most absurd misrepresentation which can be applied to the new mechanics is to interpret it as one more offspring of the old philosophic relativism, of which it is in fact the executioner. In the old relativism our knowledge is relative because what we aspire to know, viz., space-time reality, is absolute and we cannot attain to it. In the physics of Einstein our knowledge is absolute ; it is reality that is relative. (Ortega y Gasset 1961: 137-138)

These views seem actually to do justice to both Einstein's theory, and if seen in analogy, they also correspond to main points in Simmel's argumentation for relativism. The problem is that Ortega y Gasset, who I feel correctly, stresses the notion of perspectivism⁹² in Einstein's formulations, strives to identify Einstein's theory of relativity (or relativism as he often puts it), with a liberation model in social ethics. This view I feel is mistaken. For what actually happens is that Ortega y Gasset is drawn to the territories he tried to escape from. When he triumphantly asserts that there is "a harmonious multiplicity of all points of view" which finally results to the formula that "there is a Chinese perspective which is fully as justified as the Western", there is nothing preventing his argument from accepting cannibalism or tyrannical exercise of power, as valid forms of human conduct, provided they are culturally specific. From this form of cultural relativism which is in essence, the old relativism which Ortega y Gasset proclaimed obsolete, the relapse to extreme subjectivism is not difficult to avoid. Although the stimulus in Ortega y Gasset's theory is indeed humanitarian, it is not really

⁹⁰ "[...] la chose est cette fois *relation*". (Bergson, 1922 : 241)

⁹¹ We should note here that Simmel, to my knowledge, does not make use of the concept of "relationism", but it seems that this is the most appropriate term for his new philosophical relativism.

⁹² "The fact of the matter is that one of the qualities proper to reality is that of possessing perspective, that is, of organising itself in different ways so as to be visible from different points." (Ortega y Gasset, 1961 : 141)

safeguarded by arguments which are often used to place relativism within the domain of contradiction. The escape from this domain was achieved with Simmel.

III. The "relationist" argument in Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money*

Among the very few commentators on Simmel's relativist epistemology, the most clear exposition comes from the marginal interpretation of Spykman. He attempts to demonstrate that relativism for Simmel does not signify a negation of truth nor objectivity. It is not as commonly thought, a theoretical counterpart of subjectivism nor does it provide an epistemological thesis for the incommensurability of all criteria of knowledge. To regard Simmel's relativism as a theory with these consequences, misinterprets what, as I'm trying to argue, is perhaps the most boldly articulated theory of relativism within the field of social sciences. Spykman's evaluation, which I openly share, sets the parameters of the following analysis :

Simmel has been accused of dissolving all forms and categories, an accusation which [is] hardly justified [...] Simmel's philosophy is a theory of functions, and although he was not a mathematician, his thought is very similar to that underlying modern mathematics. To see a form or a category in its relation to life is not to dissolve it, but to see it as a function relative to a system of reference. A function of one or more variables is not something inferior to a constant because, as quantity it is variable. That would be to misunderstand its essence which is not quantity, but relationship.

The essential characteristic of a function is not variability of quantity, but constancy of relationship. This constancy of relationship between variables has therefore an element of absoluteness in relation to these variables. A function is itself a form. To see a category or a form as a function is therefore not to dissolve them, but to see them in the only possible way in which an absolute can appear in a changing dynamic system. It is only in the form of a function that such an absolute can adequately be expressed. It is only through such a relativization that true universality can be reached. (Spykman 1925: 21)

What is mostly important here is the notion of reciprocity. Even in Simmel's purely sociological writings, reciprocity in interaction is the tool he employs for explanation of social phenomena. But in epistemology as well, Simmel identified reciprocity as this criterion through which knowledge is possible at all. For example, experience is "real and confirmable only through relations with others"⁹³. In a manner anticipating the philosophical basis of the theories of Mead, Goffman or even Cooley, Simmel locates

⁹³ Simmel, (1978 : 102)

knowledge within the reciprocal relation between the I and the You. This knowledge is validated through the fact that each of these factors "refers to the other, in a constant interchange and exchange of elements against each other, through which truth . . . is produced."⁹⁴ What underlines the notion of reciprocity here, or even the notion of exchange, is the fact that "objects", in the wider sense of the word, do not possess any intrinsic quality but they acquire "quality" only in relation to other objects. Or, put it differently, the attempt to discover the quality of an object should not be directed towards the analysis of the object *per se*, but rather towards its relation to other objects. Simmel often uses examples from the physical science to illustrate this point. So, the analogy with weight clarifies the distinctive notion of relativity and truth which Simmel has in mind.⁹⁵ This assumption is verified by Simmel's approach to sociological phenomena; and it is a misunderstanding to account for Simmel's formal sociology as a definitive description of discrete contents, when in reality it is only a heuristic. It deals with a relation of contents rather than offering a means of transcending these particular reciprocal relations. Now, this brings us to the fundamental basis of Simmel's epistemology, which is closely linked with vitalism. Simmel points acutely to the changes of orientation between what he calls "old" and "modern" science. The desire, or even better the need for the attainment of any fixed criteria of knowledge, beyond not only contradictions, but also beyond relations, has been according to Simmel, the primary drive of human thought, and consequently culture. The tendency whereby "relations are relegated to a preliminary stage which the understanding has to transcend", is gradually being replaced by the modern scientific tendency, or rather the general tendency which permeates all spheres of modern life, to "comprehend phenomena through or as . . . motions, the bearers of which are increasingly divested of any specific qualities".⁹⁶

The concept of the absolute which is usually dissociated from conventional relativism, is in Simmel's case inextricably linked with relationism. Simmel accepts the logical possibility of the existence of an Absolute or as he elsewhere puts it, "an unconditioned truth", which exists though it is impossible to verify its existence or validity. In other words, Simmel by using Vaihinger's fictional principle of "as-if", proceeds with the development of his theory of knowledge undermining the a priori assumption of the existence of the Absolute.⁹⁷ This quasi-agnostic approach of Simmel

⁹⁴ Ibid. : 112

⁹⁵ "Cognition is [...] a free-floating process, whose elements determine their position reciprocally, in the same way as masses of matter do by means of weight. Truth is then a relative concept as weight." (Simmel, 1978 : 106)

⁹⁶ Ibid. : 102-103

⁹⁷ The reader of this section in Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money* may notice that his thoughts on relativism have a purely defensive character. It is almost certain that Simmel refers to an eminent

towards the Absolute is significant for his theory of relativism, mainly for the reason that it is used to validate relationism. Simmel, does not regard truth and falsehood as co-relational concepts. What he says in the aforementioned letter to Rickert about this dualism, he also says in *The Philosophy of Money*, about the absolute and the relative:

If the concept of relativity is constructed in such a way that it requires an absolute, it is impossible to eliminate the absolute without self-contradiction. However, the course of our investigation will show that an absolute is not required as a conceptual counterpart to the relativity of things. (Simmel 1978: 104)

The basis of this presupposition is Simmel's plausible reasoning that we can never be in a position which will guarantee to us with definitive and unequivocal certainty, that we have reached the absolute. What we at any point in time or space regard as absolute, may actually prove to be provisional, and be rendered in the future as obsolete and inadequate. But whereas this is taken as pessimism which dissolves knowledge, for Simmel it is clearly "a positive challenge, which the history of thought has illustrated many times".⁹⁸ In fact, what Simmel does is to extend the notion of the absolute into infinity, since there is no point in the course of knowledge where one can regard any principle as axiomatic. In reality, the validity or utility of any principle is determined only by a preceding or a future one, in other words only in relation to other principles located in time and space. The conclusion which is reached then is that knowledge and the way mind proceeds in its attempt to attain it, cannot escape circularity which in its turn is determined by relativity. Therefore the "discovery of truth" is removed to infinity or circularity whereby "one statement is true only in relation to another one" which itself exists as true "only in relation to the first".⁹⁹ This relational principle is apparent in hermeneutics, which as we shall see at a later chapter, constitutes an integral part of Simmel's epistemology. In what

articulation of the problem. Such an articulation is to be found in Herbert Spencer's *First Principles* a very likely source for Simmel's counter-argument. Spencer discusses here the relativity of human knowledge. Anticipating vitalistic argument about the impossibility of attaining absolute knowledge, the utility of all action, and the necessity of partial knowledge. He writes : "Deep down [...] in the very nature of Life, the relativity of our knowledge is discernible. The analysis of vital actions in general, leads not only to the conclusion that things in themselves cannot be known to us; but also to the conclusion that knowledge of them , were it possible, would be useless." (Spencer 1887: 86). Aside from this, indeed, obvious fact, Spencer attempts to show that any discussion involving the existence of the Relative presupposes also the existence of its opposite, thus rendering relativity contradictory. Specifically, he concludes that "from the very necessity of thinking in relations, it follows that the Relative is itself conceivable, except as related to a real Non-relative. [...] unless a real Non-relative or Absolute be postulated, the Relative itself becomes absolute; and so it brings the argument to a contradiction." (Spencer 1887: 96-97). Simmel's demonstration that the Absolute is not a necessary counterpart of the Relative, concludes, as we shall see, with the replacement of the Absolute by relations.

⁹⁸ Simmel (1978: 104)

⁹⁹ Ibid. : 106

can be considered as a methodology of a psychologically oriented interpretation, he asserts that :

Only the combination and fusion of several traits in one focal point forms a personality which then in its turn imparts to each individual trait a personal-subjective quality. It is not that it is this *or* that trait that makes a unique personality of man, but that he is this *and* that trait. (Simmel 1978: 296)

Now, what we would call, objectively, the personality of this or that man, acquires its objectivity only through the mutual interaction and reciprocity of subjective elements. It may not be entirely clear yet, how the reciprocity and interaction behind action escape the pitfalls of the old view of relativism. One ought here to distinguish between the noetic steps of Simmel's reasoning, in order to uncover the process behind the formulation of relationism. Perhaps, the first fundamental postulate is that of the use of the fictional epistemological principle of "as-if", which belongs to Vaihinger. By means of this principle and in the name of relativism Simmel replaces the treatment of entities as absolutes, by the treatment of them *as if* they were absolutes. Through this "as-if" hypothesis, "the constitutive principles that claim to express, once and for all, the essence of objects are transposed into regulative principles which are only points of view in the progress of knowledge".¹⁰⁰

The reason which commands the replacement of absolute and fixed criteria of knowledge, resides on the essence of reality and of our being. The first, is a moving process which unconditionally, creates forms for the comprehension of the world. The second, is a constellation of many aspects in the interaction of the mind and the soul. In neither case can the "concept" exhaust them in terms of understanding, all the properties embodied in either an aspect of the external world, or an interior aspect of our being. All concepts, seem to be for Simmel, provisional, since their static character reduces *de facto* their potential for permanent and comprehensive explanation, and since they are historically conditioned by a certain spatio-temporal locale. It is utility which gives rise to the functional significance of particular concepts or ideas, which though continue to present themselves as definitive or exhaustive exegeses (whether one talks about science, religion, art etc.). As in Bergson, the negation of an epistemological *telos* in the process of knowledge, is what ultimately replaces teleology by relational methodology. This happens according to Simmel, through a radical change in methodology. Whereas previously, assertions attempted to identify the essence of things, these now "are changed into heuristic" principles which aim only at determining "our methods of attaining

¹⁰⁰ Simmel, 1978 : 110

knowledge by formulating ideal ends..."¹⁰¹ This is not contradictory for Simmel. He simply uses the fictional principle of "as-if" by Vaihinger, in order to establish the validity of the relational method through the invalidity of the idea of positing an actual end in the process of knowledge. Again, he stresses the purely methodological significance of the relational principle which allows maximum flexibility without contradiction. The outcome of this process is that :

The true unity of apprehension is secured only by such a dissolution of dogmatic rigidity into the **living and moving** process. Its ultimate principles become realized not in the form of mutual exclusion, but in the form of **mutual dependence, mutual evocation** and **mutual complementation**. ([Emphasis added] Simmel 1978: 110)

Simmel then, is led to make assertions about the inevitable function of our thinking. If the qualitative essence of an object is established only through a relation of dependence, reciprocity and interaction with other objects or principles, then the mind is constantly found within a permanent state of fluctuation between the different elements which constitute this relationship of dependence or reciprocity. Each time, it treats them as absolutes, since for Simmel unlike Bergson, the mind has a partial predisposition towards stability. Simmel then, is led to assert that thought moves always "from multiplicity to unity and from unity to multiplicity".¹⁰² Further dimensions of this reasoning include the oscillation between monism and pluralism or between the individual and society. In all cases, none of these extremes *is* definitive, but it appears *as if* it were definitive. The latter possibility leaves space for the inclusion and existence of its own opposite, which is reached only through the mutually antithetical but also complementary, noetic functions of analysis and synthesis. The implication of this type of reasoning is that for Simmel what we at any time perceive as absolute is only ostensibly so, since it is no more than a further step in the infinite path of knowledge. The reason why we identify this step as absolute may be attributed to the socio-historical conditions which characterize that particular stage of knowledge, and which command its treatment as absolute and definitive. Consequently, this arbitrary "faith" on an element in the moving process of reality, as being absolute, must reside on needs posited by utility, or rather on the unfulfilled satisfaction of these needs. Through Nietzschean reasoning, Simmel proceeds with a psychologistic construction of epistemology. If the only criterion for truth is what leads us to the "desired consequences", namely the fact that certain actions are characterized or

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² *ibid.* : 111

biologically registered as useful and expedient "through selection and cultivation" then the logical outcome is a kind of internal order that determines the inclusion or exclusion of every new interpretation for action. By making desire the criterion for knowledge, and consequently by subjugating desire to growth and development, Simmel approaches Nietzsche's conception of the will-to-power as the criterion for truth. Simmel's more elegant formulation may, at first glance, conceal this fact but it is difficult to deny that action as will-to-power is made here a tool for self-development ; this in its turn is meaningful only as utilization and reference to already existing and functional resources, i.e. power. Hence,

Individual judgements may support each other, since the norms and facts already established substantiate others, but the totality of these norms and facts has validity only in relation to specific physio-psychological organizations, their conditions of life and the **furthering of their activity** ([Emphasis added] Simmel 1978: 108)

It seems then, that the ideas behind the notion of relationism are now identifiable. Heuristics replaces teleology, and interaction replaces exclusion. In the study for example, of the individual, this would take the form of the dilemma between a psychological or a sociological interpretation. However, instead of an absolute negation of one or the other, one is led to the interaction of the two realms which constitute the individual in his indivisible unity, that is, his psychologically ascribed orientation and his socially determined action. Both, are not discrete aspects of the personality, but shape each other permanently and unconditionally. In other words, one of these at any time, is conceived not *in itself*, but rather, *in relation* to its opposite. These elements, or any two opposing elements in a relation, although subjective in some sense since they're separate, denote "through the relativity of their application" their antithesis, namely, "the objective significance of things".¹⁰³ Thus, through a process of reciprocal legitimation, the subjective elements in a relationship enter in the cumulative process of knowledge, reaching thus objectivity, a knowledge though, whose ultimate boundaries or truth criteria are only transitory links between the past and the future. But the past and the future are relative notions ; their definition is determined by the spatio-temporal position of the subject-observer ; consequently, since they are subject to constant change, the truth criteria which form the paradigm of what in any time can be regarded as "present", are also subject to change. Thus, one element is not simply influenced by a new element which enters the relationship. The reciprocity which inevitably gives the relation a new

¹⁰³ *ibid.* : 114

character *is* actually what determines each participant element. Consequently, the I is not determined by the You, but by the interaction between the I and the You, or as Simmel puts it, by the "constant interchange and exchange of elements against each other" within a relationship of permanent "interplay".¹⁰⁴ This notion of interplay or interaction or even exchange is according to Simmel the pre-condition, indeed the essence of any relationship at all.

For Simmel, not all relations are symmetrical or equal in their effects or outcomes. In fact, it is the opposite that seems to be the norm. Relations are usually unequal, and therefore inhibit the observer from identifying the contribution of both "agents" or "elements" within a particular relationship. As a consequence, most cases of interaction, whether between individuals or between natural forces, are presented to the observer as completely one-dimensional. The fact that only one of the two aspects of the interactive relationship, is identified not as being prevalent, which is what in fact is the case, but instead, as being the *only* one existent, points to the distortions which are caused by such asymmetries in forms of reciprocal relations.¹⁰⁵ Simmel strives here to identify the problematic essence of any adherence to absolute (in this case, one-dimensional) exegeses, arguing that they solely depend on the obfuscation of the relational form behind every interaction, through the domination of one element in the relationship. Resorting to natural phenomena, Simmel asserts that the case of weight and gravitation present a similar case.¹⁰⁶ So, the change in the paradigmatic structure of natural science, in this particular context of weight, which took centuries to be realized, seems to be potentially feasible within the context of society. The point then, would be to break up with appearances which obscure the reciprocal, and therefore relational, essence of social relationships. Again, the echoes of vitalism can be felt here, since the consequence of this sort of reasoning transfers the debate onto the plane of the opposition between the static and the dynamic (since reciprocity by definition conveys movement which is *real*,

¹⁰⁴ Simmel, (1978 : 112)

¹⁰⁵ A very interesting example comes from Simmel's essays on superordination and subordination in interaction. Simmel draws on what can be regarded as a typical case of one-sidedness in a relationship between two individuals. He writes : "The most characteristic case of this type is shown, perhaps, by hypnotic suggestion. An outstanding hypnotist pointed out that in every hypnosis the hypnotized has an effect upon the hypnotist ; and that, although the effect cannot be easily determined, the result of the hypnosis could not be reached without it. Thus here, too, appearance shows an absolute influence, on the one side, and an absolute being-influenced on the other ; **but it conceals an interaction, an exchange of influences, which transforms the pure one-sidedness of superordination and subordination into a sociological form.**" ([Emphasis added] Simmel, 1950 : 186)

¹⁰⁶ We read, for example, that : "the disproportion of weights caused us, for a long time, to notice the gravitational attraction of the earth upon the apple but not that of the apple upon the earth. Consequently, a body appeared to have weight as an independent quality, **because only one side of the relationship was observed.**" ([Emphasis added] Simmel, 1978 : 116)

whereas stability connotes distortion, thus placing man in the realm of the *unreal* ; although for Simmel, the latter attitude may not be preferable, but it is inevitable and functionally valid). Attempting to link relativity and truth, Simmel confirms the outcome of his reasoning :

Thus, truth may come to be regarded as a specific quality of an individual representation, because the reciprocal relation between the elements, **in which the truth resides**, is lost to view on account of the infinitesimal size of the single element in relation to the sum of representations, which are not, for the moment, in question. ([Emphasis added] Simmel 1978: 116)

From this point onwards, Simmel starts delineating the assumptions which separate his relativism (i.e. relationism) with what relativism had been hitherto associated with. The firmly established association between relativism and the negation or corrosion of truth, are radically, and justly I feel, challenged by Simmel's new orientation. The vital link which he established between relativity, reciprocity and truth, points to a substantive change within epistemology. At this stage I will not be dealing with the arguments employed by scholars who are not sympathetic to relativism, and which aim at proving relativism fallacious (I refer here to the argument which "demonstrates" the circularity of the relativistic reasoning which only ostensibly renders it contradictory). Returning to our discussion, Simmel through the notions of reciprocity and interaction validates the thesis which equates truth with relativity. The latter, is "the essential feature" of the former, basically because through relativity "representations become truth", or "objects of demand become values".¹⁰⁷

Simmel also seeks to safeguard relativism from contradiction. If one asserts for example, that every world-view is relative, and consequently that relativism is a world-view then one ends up with the relative validity of relativism as an epistemological principle. But this is a problem only if the first premise is established in an absolute sense. However, the "independent" criterion of truth which relativizes relativism is removed in the following way:

The question as to the grounding of this principle [i.e heuristic, relativistic], which is not incorporated in the principle itself, constitutes no difficulty for relativism, because the ground is removed to infinity. Relativism strives to dissolve into a relation every absolute that presents itself, and proceeds in the same way with the absolute that offers itself as the ground for this new relation. This is a never-ending process whose heuristic eliminates the alternative: either to deny or to accept the absolute. It makes no

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.* : 116

difference how one expresses it : either that there is an absolute but it can be grasped only by an infinite process, or that there are only relations but they can only replace the absolute in an infinite process. (Simmel 1978: 117)

Simmel provides here the answer to Spencer's earlier doubts as to the validity of relativism as a consistent and non-contradictory doctrine. This argument anticipates similar defences of relativism¹⁰⁸ and it gives rise to the *positive* functional relativism that Simmel has in mind. The continuous process of dissolution through which we uncover the functional dependence of every element on another, ultimately leads to universality and harmony; however as soon as such an absolute relationship of interdependence is achieved it requires a second principle since monistic understanding is no longer expedient; indeed, for purposes of understanding it is meaningless.

It must have become clear by now, the way by which Simmel introduces what today we call "relationism". The main implication of this epistemological principle, is that it replaces a teleological process by one which extends to infinity, and that it dissolves the concept of "quality" to that of "interaction". Simmel points to the crux of the matter, in the following excerpt :

The finiteness of existence is only transcended through the conditioning of every content of being by another content, which in turn is equally conditioned - either by a third factor which undergoes the same process or **by an interaction of the two**. ([Emphasis added] Simmel 1978: 119)

The validation of one content through *its form of interaction* with its counterpart, reminds us vividly of the Fichtean version of the interplay between form and matter. Simmel, having dissolved all processes into interaction, not only elevated relativism from the realm of negativity onto a positive level of explanation, but he also planted the seeds for the cultivation of his metaphysical world-view, namely vitalism. In other words, Simmel points to the need of an epistemology and a metaphysics for every successful problem-solving social science. Sociology therefore seems to be fitted within a relativistic epistemology that uses relationism in order to counterbalance constancy with flux and additionally is enclosed within a vitalistic metaphysics which accounts for change and creativity and transition. The long-established opposition between the static (constancy) and the dynamic (flux) acquires with Simmel a functional significance. Exegetical deficiencies or dogmatism stemmed from the perspective of constancy which views flux as its opposite. This strict dualistic pattern is transformed by Simmel into a functional

¹⁰⁸ Hesse (1980: 42-43), Barnes and Bloor in Hollis and Lukes (21-47).

unity since any epistemology that stresses flux, movement and transition accounts for constancy as well - in a positive sense - since it does not view it as its opposite but rather as necessity, without which all thought and action would be dissolved into anarchy. As he aptly puts it, "necessity" implies the unity of "heterogeneous elements" so that its formula is : "if A exists so does B".¹⁰⁹ Through necessity we achieve the unity desired by any process of understanding - interactively - the world.

IV. Relationism in Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* / Conclusion

The epistemological attempt of Karl Mannheim to challenge the prevalent attitudes which associated relativism with the destruction of truth criteria, resonates with Simmel's efforts, which were already elaborated in his *The Philosophy of Money*, almost three decades before the publication of *Ideology and Utopia*. Although Mannheim's formulation of the novel concept of relationism, is to a certain extent strongly reminiscent of Simmel's arguments, it still remains puzzling as to its success in dissociating itself from obsolete relativism. Perhaps, this can be attributed to the fact that Mannheim's general theory of knowledge, was not entirely free of the links with historicism. Additionally, Mannheim seems to be emphasizing the emancipatory character of his relationism, which as we shall try to demonstrate, remains undeveloped in some of its premises, without though fully making clear the potential consequences of such a scheme.

It is interesting to observe that Mannheim follows preliminary ideas which are very close to Simmel's. Yet, the references to the early German sociologist are almost non-existent. As in Simmel, the guideline behind the methodological need for relationism, is life's movement. In the first sections of his book, Mannheim draws largely on vitalistic premises which are mostly, only covertly detectable. For example, for Mannheim,

There is a point where the movement of life itself, especially in its greatest crisis, elevates itself above itself and becomes aware of its own limits. (Mannheim 1936: 47)

He stresses often that the flux of life and reality call for a more dynamic explanatory form, other than relativism or scepticism. The fact that reality changes, with its historical periods and social conditions, points to the need for an epistemological principle which is able to adapt its explanatory framework to these changes. The problem seems to be, as Mannheim believes, purely hermeneutic. He derives the necessity for a new method out

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*: 109

of the inconsistency in socio-historical interpretation between the interpreter and the interpretandum. For Mannheim then, old relativism

is a product of the modern historical-sociological procedure which is based on the recognition that all historical thinking is bound up with the concrete position in life of the thinker. (Mannheim 1936: 78-79)

The task then is to surpass the subjectivity which inheres in the mind of the thinker-observer, and which relegates all knowledge to an unlimited process of relativization. Mannheim though offers at certain stages of his argument, a confusing alternative. For example, he maintains that "historical knowledge is relational" and that it can be established only "with reference to the position of the observer".¹¹⁰ But is this attitude really different from what Mannheim sought to criticize in historical relativism? In both cases he places the emphasis on the perspective of the observer. Clearly he does not employ the historicist view here, which portrays historical eras for example, as hermetically sealed containers of knowledge, which can only be partially reconstructed, and therefore partially understood. The problem seems to be that Mannheim makes extensive use of what he criticizes, in substantiating the validity of his type of relationism. In trying to clarify this new epistemology, he writes :

Relationism signifies merely that all of the elements of meaning in a given situation have reference to one another and derive their significance from this **reciprocal interrelationship** in a given frame of thought. Such a system of meanings is possible and valid only in a given type of historical existence [...] ([Emphasis added] Mannheim 1936: 86)

The emphasis on reciprocity is what recalls Simmel's formulation of relationism. Meaning is established only through mutual interaction of all the elements within a particular relationship ; this relationship though is historically conditioned and so are its meaningful properties. Mannheim is rather unclear as to what relationism really is ; and especially as to what truth is, under the aspect of relationism. For Simmel, as we have seen, truth is "a relation of contents", for truth cannot possibly be fixed, since this fixity : a) does not exist because it cannot be demonstrated, and b) even if it exists it cannot be grasped. Mannheim though seems to locate the validity of a particular criterion within the historical situation within which it develops.¹¹¹ A concrete example of this reasoning

¹¹⁰ Mannheim, 1936 : 79

¹¹¹ It is interesting here to mention, and perhaps do justice to Mannheim, that he negated the relativistic character which was usually applied to historicism. He did that in order to defend historicism and not relativism : "To many, relativism and historicism appear to be so intimately fused together that they interpret historicism as a doctrine which says that, since everything in a sense is "history", all action and

comes from an attempt of Mannheim's to apply relationism to morality. He says :

Relativism would mean that there are no objective values, *therefore* moral obligation cannot exist. Relationism, on the other hand, stresses the fact that there *is* a moral obligation, but that this obligation *is derived from the concrete situation to which it is related*. ([italics in the original] Mannheim 1953: 212)

But if this moral obligation is valid only within the particular or unique situation which is related to it, then one must assume that its validity would dissappear somewhere else. Mannheim uses the word "situation", to convey *social* situations or social structures. But these social structures are in their turn concrete historical products. Eventually, if this obligation is valid only within such a situation, then this is tantamount to the fact that it doesn't really exist, since it cannot be found with the same contents, somewhere else. Mannheim seems here to have fallen prey of the trap he invented in order to refute the old philosophic relativism. Simmel in his letter to Rickert had already dismissed similar arguments as "platitudes". Despite the fact that Mannheim's initial orientation for the construction of relationism was fundamentally similar to Simmel's (they both vehemently denied the premise of old relativism which denied the existence of criteria of truth, thus blurring the boundaries between truth and falsehood)¹¹², he nevertheless stuck to some of the old relativism's postulates which eventually inhibited his effort to develop relationism to its full potential.

The notion of relationism has always been associated with Mannheim rather than Simmel. This may seem logical, since it was Mannheim who invented the label. Strangely enough though, Mannheim who as we know was familiar with Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money*,¹¹³ does not refer at all to the German sociologist. This is indeed paradoxical, since had Mannheim used Simmel's argument, he would have reached a more substantial and convincing expression of relationism. Simmel's analysis although it operates in a much more abstract and general epistemological level, proves ultimately

decision is relative and lacks a standard". (Mannheim, 1952 : 127) The problem though, is that Mannheim's so-called "objectivity", which he sees as residing in the essence of relationism, is reduced to mere subjectivity conditioned by *its* socio-historical context, since *only* provisional social frameworks are used as factors of determining the validity of a relationship.

¹¹² Using an example from physics, Mannheim suggests that : "Just as the fact that every measurement in space hinges upon the nature of light does not mean that our measurements are arbitrary, but merely that they are only valid in relation to the nature of light, so in the same way not relativism in the sense of arbitrariness but *relationism* applies to our discussions. Relationism does not signify that there are no criteria of rightness and wrongness [...] It does insist, however, that it lies in the nature of certain assertions that they cannot be formulated absolutely, but only in terms of the perspective of a given situation." (Mannheim, 1936 : 283)

¹¹³ Cited in the bibliography section of *Ideology and Utopia*, 1936 : 328.

more successful in integrating via relational relativism, a philosophical epistemology with microsociological observation, something which is not to be found in Mannheim's more ambitious but also more flawed scheme. Mannheim's failure to conceive relativism in relation to forms as positive steps toward a progressive social science was not shared by Spykman who, correctly, saw the function of Simmel's vitalism and relativism in life's "embodiment in new and better forms".¹¹⁴ This sociologically relevant dimension, which Simmel introduces through the notions of reciprocity, interaction and exchange, provides also the possibility of verification from everyday social experience, which he sees as vital for a coherent, progressive and dynamic epistemology.

¹¹⁴ Spykman (1925: 20)

Chapter 3 : Simmel and Dilthey : Relativism and Interpretive Understanding

I. Introduction

Simmel's quest for epistemological grounding of the themes he dealt with, can be demonstrated only by a careful study of the anatomy of his works. These present us with a wide range of topics which Simmel sought to analyze with the necessary clarity and profundity which characterizes any genuine attempt to explain social phenomena. The authenticity of his thought is further displayed by the framework within which all of his writings fall, that is the epistemological - methodological substance of his analyses. Even the most diverse and obscure of Simmel's treatments of social life and its ramifications, crystallize in a systematic yet always covertly self-critical world-view (*weltanschauung*). The evinced curiosity of Simmel to penetrate into the maximum depth of the complex subjects he sought to describe, led him often to fundamentally question the validity of the premises he initially used for the basis of his analysis. And to the eyes of many readers, who fail to grasp the circularity of Simmel's thought, this would mean that his writings remain fragmented and inconclusive. His strong background and interest in philosophy (Spinoza, Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche), and his constant flirtation with sociology, blossomed in the most acute and microscopically detailed descriptions of social phenomena to have ever appeared in sociological theory. However, the nature of some of the themes which occupied Simmel, did not allow him to develop to the utmost of his abilities the descriptive competence which is so appealing in his purely sociological writings. The essays on history and its philosophical implications belong to this category.

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the significance of Simmel's essays on the problems of the philosophy of history, for his general epistemological doctrine of relativism. In addition, I will examine the apparent interconnectedness of relativism with other aspects of Simmel's theory, such as vitalism, formalism, and modernity, in his audacious attempt to reformulate the discourse in the philosophy of history. The core of my argument, is the relation of history to the epistemological principles of relativism and interpretative understanding. Peripheral to the analysis is the idea of life-philosophy and its concomitant implications for historical relativism.

During my examination of Simmel's methodological procedure, I will necessarily expand the discussion to include other epistemological spheres such as irrationalism and

evolutionism, both inextricably linked with the problem of historical understanding. In fact it was Simmel who mooted the question again as it was addressed by Dilthey who actually termed a certain methodological principle as understanding (*Verstehen*).

It seems essential that Dilthey's epistemology which forms an integral part of the reaction to German Idealism, should be contrasted to Simmel's who actually attempted to move this idea a few steps further, by ascribing to it a more relativistic, vitalistic and irrational content. For it is the fruitful combination of Dilthey and Simmel whose epistemological background is underlined by such deep-rooted themes, that makes their theories pertinent to both history and sociology.

Tackling with precision a topic such as relativism is not an easy task, especially when it is to be analyzed within the framework of a particular science or discipline. The peculiarities and intricacies of a discipline such as history, provide us with ample difficulties and dangers of deviating from the issue at hand. For the avoidance of such pitfalls, the structure of the present chapter has the following steps: firstly, I feel it is essential to establish as clearly as possibly the pivotal point of our discussion. Historical relativism will be defined, dissected into various elements, and presented as a vigorous epistemological doctrine with clearly stated methodological premises. To this end, our discussion will be complemented by the works of Bradley, Mandelbaum and Aron, who have dealt with the historical and epistemological implications of relativism, and simultaneously we will establish the first connections between the doctrine of historical relativism and Dilthey's and Simmel's works on the philosophy of history.

Following the general discussion on historical relativism, it seems appropriate to continue with the scrutiny of Dilthey's epistemology. The underlying themes of this section will be the epistemological dichotomy between natural and social sciences, the particular methodology which evolved from such separation, a methodology which culminates in the vigorous but at the same time equivocal principles of relativism and vitalism. At this stage the reader should bear in mind that a detailed analysis of vitalism, which is obviously highly relevant to both Dilthey and Simmel, is postponed for later examination in the comparison between Simmel and Bergson. However, we will occupy ourselves with some of the elements which form the essence of vitalism, since a discussion excluding this principle would provide only a distorted and highly problematic depiction of the debate.

Central to the discussion on the problems of historical understanding, is of course, Simmel. His theory is the focal point of this analysis since we attempt to bridge the gap between his epistemology and his general outlook on culture and modernity. And since modernity is the direct outcome of highly important historical transformations, then I feel it is worth looking at Simmel's insights on the nature of historical understanding, which

for the patient reader, will gradually unfold the pivotal forces lying behind the concept of modernity. Key issues of Simmel's theory will be brought to the forefront of the discussion, such as the psychological explanation of historical phenomena, the possibility of establishing historical laws and the perceptual relativism of historical inquiry, to name but a few. Additionally, we will compare the views of Dilthey and Simmel, attempting via a synthetic process to trace affinities and overlapping points in their theories.

Finally, and for the purpose of providing a comprehensive but by no means definitive picture of Simmel's philosophy of history, I will comment critically or sympathetically, depending on the case, on Simmel's reception by other theorists. Therefore, pertinent to my effort to grasp as many sides as possible, of the problem, will be the references to the works of Collingwood, Mandelbaum, Lukács, Aron and Mamelet, since they all offer evaluations of Simmel's reasoning.

These are then the parameters of my attempt to measure to what extent the intellectual innovations of Dilthey matched the perspicacity of Simmel in issues of utmost epistemological interest. I now turn to the discussion of the general framework of analysis, namely historical relativism.

II. Towards a re-appraisal of Simmel's writings in the philosophy of history

The reception and subsequent treatment of Simmel's work in the philosophy of history is rather limited. Even among Simmel's chief interpreters, such as Frisby, there is very little reference to this branch of Simmel's thought. Either the several revisions which Simmel himself made of *The Problems of the Philosophy of History*, which perhaps indicate confusion in the mind of the author and potential uncertainty for the research scholar, or the obscurity which characterizes Simmel's work in general but is more palpable here, might be considered as sufficient reasons for the reluctance of Simmelians to shed light in this facet of his thought.

In this section I am going to identify briefly, the way Simmel was received by those who almost exclusively dealt with history as a discipline. R.G. Collingwood's well-respected *The Idea of History* is a suitable starting point. Although Simmel receives a very limited analysis, Collingwood manages to distort radically some vital aspects of Simmel's thought. The accusation that Simmel attributes a mechanical and not an organic process in history, is as I have just demonstrated, false. There is no "dead" past for Simmel, but both past and present, as parts of the same cosmic force, namely life, are in a reciprocal relation whereby each reflects on the other for its realization. As for the

"absolute" which Collingwood¹¹⁵ strives so much to decipher in Simmel, it is obvious that Collingwood neglected his relativism and the heuristic character of the "absolute" which Simmel sought to discover in order to substantiate his relativism. It is rather strange how a versatile thinker such as Collingwood overlooked the vitalistic character of Simmel's version of history and charged him with positivism, a diagnosis which is more applicable to Dilthey.

Maurice Mandelbaum's appraisal of Simmel's theory is more interesting because it is more insightful. Although he grasps many of Simmel's positions correctly, he seems to suggest that Simmel attempted unsuccessfully to overcome his relativism. Additionally, although skeptical about his labelling of Simmel as a counter-relativist (along with Rickert, Scheler and Troeltsch), he finally attributes the failure of Simmel's attempt, to his combination of philosophy and history. He implies that had Simmel been more pragmatic and less speculative, he would have escaped his relativism. But Mandelbaum misunderstands Simmel's aim, which was no other than to establish his relativism via an "absolute" which he constantly sought, an idea clearly stated in his *The Philosophy of Money*.

One of the most accurate and satisfactory handlings of Simmel's philosophy of history is given by Raymond Aron. His books on the critical philosophy of history (1948, 1950a), offer comprehensive accounts of the major exponents of historical idealism in Germany. Although Aron is not very enthusiastic about historical relativism and historicism, he recognizes the impact of the relativistic philosophy of history initiated primarily from the breakthrough with positivism. The access to the mysterious psychological nature of historical events and the metaphysical and irrational essence ascribed to history by primarily Dilthey and Simmel, established the basis for an individualistic social science.¹¹⁶ He clearly demonstrates Simmel's perseverance with individualism a point also espoused by Weber, although the attitudes of the two thinkers converge in very few points. The deficiency in Simmel, according to Aron, is that since the search for an absolute is not fruitful in either the history of mankind, or as the goal of objective truth, then the individual is actually left with a nihilism reminiscent of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the concomitant implications of which are discernible in fatalism.

¹¹⁵ The following evaluation of Simmel is typical of the problematic nature of Collingwood's interpretation : "[Simmel] has confused the historical process, in which the past lives on in the present, with a natural process, in which the past dies when the present is born. This reduction of the historical process to a natural process is part of the legacy of positivism, so that here once more Simmel's failure to construct a philosophy of history is due to his incomplete escape from a positivistic point of view". (Collingwood, 1946 : 171).

¹¹⁶ Aron (1948 : 300)

Concentrating on the appraisals of Simmelians exclusively, I feel that the work of Mamelet is by far the most adequate. His brilliant dissertation (1914) on Simmel's relativism touches upon the relation between this doctrine and history. The importance of his evaluation lies on the fact that after 75 years of research on Simmel, it remains the most timely piece on Simmel's epistemology, but by no means definitive¹¹⁷, only to be approached by Weingartner's classic work. Mamelet remains perhaps the only interpreter of Simmel's philosophy who has managed to trace his relativism to the very foundation of his thought and to have presented it as a vigorous epistemology.¹¹⁸

Recent treatments of Simmel's theory of history (Boudon, Lichtblau) are not very illuminating. Only Oakes provides a highly sophisticated and accurate account of Simmel's thought drawn however from a purely Kantian perspective. Relativism is hardly mentioned, but nevertheless the author's insight into Simmel is such that the conclusions arrived at, reveal a profound knowledge of his object of study.¹¹⁹

III. Historical Relativism : General Premises

We are thrown into the world. From the moment of our birth we are bombarded with images which are structured out of the natural and the social environment within which, mysteriously, we happen to find ourselves. We are able to absorb the images or the stimuli presented to us, and through the passing of time we find ourselves in the situation of being able to reflect on states of being which are no longer with us, or in other words to recall moments, events, which belong to the first category of the artificial structure we have defined as "past - present - future". This sequence or heuristic principle is not only a valuable tool of the historian who dives into the past and distills it in the present. It is a more general framework of reference which allows us to place and orientate ourselves within the stream of experience. However, the process of diving into the past, presents us with an insoluble problem. No matter how hard we try to recall and

¹¹⁷ The reason being that when Mamelet wrote this dissertation (1914), Simmel was still publishing essays (until his death in 1918), so eventually Mamelet proceeded without taking Simmel's whole work into account.

¹¹⁸ He concludes his discussion on Simmel's historical relativism by an attack on the Marxist interpretation of history through reciprocity and relativism. Simmel here denies the premise of historical materialism that it can provide an exact reproduction of reality. (Mamelet 1914: 132)

¹¹⁹ Characteristically, Oakes infers from his study of Simmel's theory of historical interpretation the following perceptive conclusion : "[...] Simmel's writings betray a curious ambivalence concerning the essential properties of interpretation. On the one hand, the psychological isomorphism between the interpreter and his subject seems to be a condition for the possibility of interpretation . . . On the other hand, Simmel also introduces the following reservation : this relationship between the mental processes of the interpreter and the mental processes of his subject should not be conceived as a mechanically reproduced form of congruence". (Oakes' introduction in Simmel, 1980 : 61).

fully reconstruct past experience, we end up with only being able to consciously realize a sequence of tiny fragments of past experience which very often remain unconnected and totally incoherent, failing thus to provide us with the complete picture of what we wished to reconstruct in the first place. Paradoxically though, we proceed as if this information, provided by our ability to reflect on past experience, is enough to create a satisfactory and meaningful account of what we sought to reconstruct. The projection of this past experience which is only partially perceived and incorporated into the present frame of reference of the individual, creates only a pseudo-objectivity if we seriously take into account any assumption which looks for an identical reconstruction of the past in the present. The attempt to reify present experience and place it in an autonomous sphere from which we attempt to recollect the fragments of the past, rests on the false assumption of treating the past as rigidly differentiated from the present.

Analogously the problem of the nature of historical understanding involves a so-called re-enactment of past experiences in the present. The substantial difference is of course, that in the case of history these experiences belong to other human beings and not to one's own lived experience. What is then the nature of historical understanding? To what extent can the historian interpret adequately past experience? And after all, what do we mean by interpretation of past events or by re-enactment and reconstruction of past experience? These fundamental questions are not only pertinent to the relativist's attempt to describe the problem. They form the core of the theoretical argument which has shaped historical debate for centuries. This debate overlaps with perennial epistemological questions which are in this case examined under the rubric of a philosophy of history which occupies itself with what is to be taken as historical knowledge and with the methodological implications of any assertion as to the way in which historical inquiry proceeds. The synthesis of all these questions acquires its most rigorous form in the ideas of experience (*erlebnis*) and understanding (*verstehen*), as these were put forward by Dilthey and expounded by Simmel. The vitalistic element which underlies both concepts culminates with Bergson, whom I am going to occupy myself with at a later stage. The reason though, we feel obliged to mention Bergson is that he provides the missing link in the vitalistic triad (Dilthey, Simmel, Bergson), substantiating in the most impressive way the formers' preoccupations with the problems of the philosophy of history.

Before I engage myself in the analysis of both thinkers' theories which adhere to the principle of relativism, I should devote some space to the general premises of historical relativism, for they provide a guideline for the rest of the discussion.

Perhaps one of the major assumptions of historical relativism concerns the conditioned state of mind of the historian, determined by his socio-cultural boundaries.

This *de facto* biased nature of the historian gives rise to value-judgements which are unavoidable in any sort of historical examination. The logical corollary of this premise leads us to the necessarily distorted and biased view of any sort of interpretation and reconstruction of past experience. It thus refutes, or at least negates the existence of a universal and objective history, substituting for it a multiplicity of "histories", which attempt to reconstruct past experience, but unavoidably modify it to fit the predominant characteristics and trends of the particular period to which the historian belongs. History is thus subject to revisions which aim at a culture-laden articulation of the object-to-be-interpreted. This reconstruction matches then the cultural tendencies of the current epoch. According to Mandelbaum who vehemently attacked relativism, the historical relativist's position is underlined by three major postulates; "first, the actual occurrences of history are richer in content than any account of them can possibly be; second, because the continuity and structure which historical works necessarily possess do not afford a true parallel to the continuity and structure which characterize the events of history; and third, because the historian of necessity passes value-judgements, and these are relevant to the present but not to the past."¹²⁰ However, Mandelbaum's reduction of relativism into the above three principles is inadequate, especially when viewed in the light of the relativism which permeates Dilthey's and Simmel's theories. In F.H. Bradley, relativism seems to acquire a more accurate form, bearing on key issues espoused by Dilthey, Simmel and Bergson. He asserts - and this is reminiscent of our previous discussion on the artificial separation of "past-present-future" - that the notions of past and future are ideal constructions whose events are malleable and subject to a change proportional to a change in the present.¹²¹ Bradley is unequivocal in asserting the plasticity of the concepts of past and future :

The past and future vary, and they have to vary, with the changes of the present [...] But, though ideal, the past and future are also real and if they were otherwise, they could be nothing for judgement of knowledge. They are actual, but they must remain incomplete essentially [...] Our knowledge does not go far, but, so far as it goes, **our idea is the veritable reality.** ([Emphasis added] Bradley 1914: 426)

Bradley's quote is interesting for various reasons. Firstly, because it accounts for variations in past and future, automatically implying that these are subject to variations of the subject's perception in the present, therefore making a stand for perspectivism or of Vaihinger's philosophy of fictions. Secondly, his historical idealism is negated by Simmel, in the sense that it is a doctrine which provides a partial picture of the problem

¹²⁰ Mandelbaum, (1967 : 36)

¹²¹ Bradley, (1914 : 426)

since it ascribes to the continuous stream of life, a discontinuity which deviates from the vitalistic explanation of history.¹²² Other thinkers such as Aron¹²³ and Lukács¹²⁴ occupied themselves with historical relativism, mainly from a critical point of view, but we feel that their attitudes will prove more useful in relation to Dilthey and Simmel.

The common themes pertaining to relativism as adduced by both theorists, can be formulated, at a very general manner, according to the following ideas : a) Life and its irreducibility is the quintessence and creative force of anything-to-be-known. b) The movement of life refutes the existence of absolute forms (although Dilthey is rather skeptical about this point), and establishes a reciprocal relationship among contents, ideas and forms; it is only through a relationship of combinations that these elements acquire qualitative properties. c) The subject, in his study of any social form and especially history, is destined to a partial and fragmentary view of what-is-to-be-known, caused by assymetries in perception as this is conditioned by the subject's own environment. Additionally, the impossibility of attaining an absolute picture of the object of study, can be deduced from a combination of all the aforementioned factors, but this will be examined in the following sections. It seems here, that we are dealing with a double layer of relativism in the process of interpretation. The fundamental dichotomy between the object and the subject demonstrates that as far as the former is concerned, it is intrinsically devoid of any qualitative property. It acquires one only in relation to another object. This view is palpable in Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money*. When it comes to the subject (in our case the historian), his views are partially or totally determined by value-judgements which inhere in the cultural environment to which he belongs. His whole being is fixed upon the particular era he is living in. His effort to reconstruct any event which belongs to past experience, determines *a priori* the way in which this material is reconstructed and eventually understood. The recollection of the past acquires a form compatible to the particular present (in the broad sense, i.e. including the cultural trends of that particular epoch, as well as the individual who is both creator and product of his own epoch). The crux of the matter is that there are some determinant factors according to which perception varies from epoch to epoch, from individual to individual. The ramifications of such a perspectivism are evident primarily in Simmel and less in Dilthey. Perhaps because the latter was not entirely free from the positivism he so fiercely polemicized against. The prevalent idea of life (*leben*) lies at the basis of the epistemological pyramid of both thinkers. It is the common theme in the legacy of German Idealism, versions of which

¹²² Simmel, (1980 :144)

¹²³ Aron, (1948 : 291-300), (1950a :21-111, : 159-218)

¹²⁴ Lukács, (1980 : 417-459)

have been embodied in vitalism, irrationalism, agnosticism and relativism. The impact of these ideas in sociology can be detected in various forms in the thought of Weber and Mannheim whose affinities with this movement I cannot afford to analyze in the present chapter.

The attack on reason and rationality was launched by the exponents of vitalism as a protest against the rationalization of every single aspect of human life. The massive developments in science contributed significantly to the formation and cultivation of the irrationalist ideas. Also, after the period of the Scottish Enlightenment, and following the thought of Saint-Simon, Spencer, Comte and Pareto, sociology was put on the way to be established as a fully-fledged positive science. The fixation with this idea occurred in the work of Durkheim who contributed immensely to the study of the social realm based on the methods employed in natural science. Thus, it was maintained, sociology should confine itself within the periphery of orthodox positive thought if it is to achieve a scientific status. The radical shift which led to a new conception of the sociological observer in relation to his subject, owes its realization in the works of the classical German theorists. Dilthey, Rickert, Simmel and Weber allowed for a new outlook in social science, through the concept of understanding (*verstehen*), and the idea of experience (*erleben*). Both ideas, however, rest on the notion of life as the primordial and creative force behind every social form. It is against life that individual volitions, social and historical phenomena are measured. It was necessary, therefore, for both Dilthey and Simmel, but especially for the latter, to ascribe to life a reified status, extending it into absolute autonomy and infinite potential for self-preservation and self-proliferation. I shall examine later on, how this idea of life relates to the plurality of interpretations, to the irrational and agnostic character of human life, and the relativism and skepticism emanating from the very nature of knowledge. At this stage and before I commence my analysis of Dilthey's epistemology, I can briefly provide a general idea of the importance of life as a guiding principle for every individual and social conduct. The methodological principles of interpretation and understanding are inextricably linked with life. Dilthey in a very clear manner sets the general meaning of the importance of life :

What we grasp through experience and understanding is life as the interweaving of all mankind. When we first confront this vast fact, which is our starting-point not only for the human studies but also for philosophy, we must try to get behind its scientific elaboration and grasp life in its raw state. (Dilthey 1976: 178)

Life thus, provides the methodological framework for any quest for knowledge. The attempt to comprehend rationally social reality is for Dilthey futile and superficial. This is the reason why he resorts to the process of "experiencing" life in order to understand it.

From this notion of experience emanates a form of relativism the major characteristics of which we have just identified. Epistemologically, the problem locates itself in the idea that life is not only the creative force behind every social formation, but that it is also the destructive one which alters everything and which relativizes any absolute truth or world-view. Simmel, although taking up some crucial themes from Dilthey, was more effective in fitting this schema into his own epistemological genre. Or vice versa, it was his epistemological edifice which was based on this scheme. The Simmelian exposition of culture and modernity is permeated by the harmonious or convulsive fluidity of life which irrationally, indeterminately and mystically pervades every historical and social formation:

If now life - as a cosmic, generic, singular phenomenon - is such a continuous stream, there is good reason for its profound opposition against form. This opposition appears as the unceasing, usually unnoticed (but also often revolutionary) battle of ongoing life against the historical pattern and formal inflexibility of any given cultural content, thereby becoming the innermost impulse toward cultural change. (Simmel 1971: 366)

Life is beyond history and society. In that sense it is incomprehensible. The possibility of grasping, perceiving and understanding life, rests on the construction of heuristic principles (i.e. forms), through which the fragmented contents of life become reality, within the reach of the individual. The multiplicity and heterogeneity of life manifest themselves in the plurality of forms of human experience which in their turn are subject to variations according to the needs of the particular groups of people. The "raw state" of life is thus distilled in social forms and becomes understood by human beings. However, these forms since they are products of the transitory and fortuitous nature of life, are gradually transformed and become modified to the character of social life at the particular epoch (modernity if seen in the light of this general metaphysical notion is a product of the battle between life and form, which ultimately results in the creation of new formal principles through which understanding of modern life can be rendered possible).

The implications of vitalism for both Dilthey and Simmel, are now going to be examined. The appropriate context is history since it provides a convenient framework, for the scrutiny of the epistemology of both theorists, under the thread of relativism. It is the evolution of relativism and understanding which I now turn to discuss as it was predicated by Dilthey.

IV. Dilthey : Life and Understanding (Verstehen)

The starting point of Dilthey's argumentation goes back to the fundamental question as to the different subject-matters of natural and social science. His ferocious attack on positivism attempted precisely the separation of the two realms. For Dilthey the gap between the two is unbridgeable. The conflation of both research areas under a common or at least similar methodological doctrine or canon is simply not feasible. The primary cause for the epistemological digression of the two bodies of knowledge from each other, stems from the following distinction :

Nature, the subject-matter of the physical sciences, embraces the reality that has arisen independently of the activity of the mind. Everything on which man has actively impressed his stamp, form the subject-matter of the human sciences. (Dilthey 1976: 192)

However, this clearcut distinction is only one side of the coin. The problems arise from Dilthey's crypto-positivistic residues which resulted from an incomplete break-off with natural science. In fact, Dilthey attempts to ascribe to nature the absolute form on which all human activity is build. For example, musical theory depends on the study of sounds first found in nature.¹²⁵ Similarly, the mental acts of human beings are partly determined by the particular physical state they find themselves at during the moment of their creation. Natural conditions affect (or wholly shape perhaps?) human minds which in their turn shape the environment in their own unique and particular way. A degree of caution is necessary here. Dilthey does not assert that in order to understand a mental act, one has to trace the natural influences reflected on this act. He simply stands against any sort of reification of the human mind, entirely cut-off from the physical environment. Any sort of evolution of social formations depends primarily on certain preconditions originally found in nature. These preconditions, one could assert, have now become obsolete since the complexity of contemporary culture and the prolific character of human activity has elevated itself to a (semi-) autonomous state. However, for Dilthey there can be an autonomous study of socio-historical reality without specific reference to the natural realm.

What is fundamentally significant for the understanding of Dilthey's epistemology is the issue of the complexity of the social world. It is through this notion that Dilthey lays the foundations for the methods of understanding. Dilthey structures his argument

¹²⁵ Dilthey, (1988 : 86)

around two main parameters. The first consists of the complexity of the social world, intrinsic to the concept of interaction. The manifold combinations of individuals and the process of establishing relationships between them, most of which are fortuitous and transient, negate the possibility of drawing uniformities which could give rise to laws applicable to the whole entity of society. Dilthey is unequivocal in delineating the difficulties for an analysis and explanation of the social whole, especially in contrast to the natural science and its object of study:

The difficulties in knowing a single psychical entity are multiplied by the great varieties and uniqueness of these entities, by the way they work together in society, by the complexity of natural conditions which bind them together, and by the sum total of mutual influences brought to bear in the succession of many generations, which does not allow us to deduce directly from human nature as we know it, the state of affairs of earlier times or to infer present states of affairs from a general type of human nature. (Dilthey 1988: 98)

The intricacies and the multiplicities of interacting factors forming the human psyche acquire a further complexity through the fact that they are subjected and often substantially altered, by social factors whose existence and creation lie again in the mental and psychic predispositions of men. The boundaries of what is socially or psychically accountable for human action, have become so opaque that the reference of sociological explanations to the psychological attributes of human beings - which remain a mystery - can be hardly rendered unjustifiable. The idea of explanation of the social world by partial or total reference to the psychic states of the individual is much more tangible in Simmel's writings.¹²⁶

The second element in Dilthey's argument about the methodological shortcomings of the social science if viewed within the epistemological perspective of the natural ones, is the position of the subject in relation to its object of study. Thus,

the individual is an element in interactions of society, **a point of intersection for different systems of these interactions**, reacting to their impulses with deliberate direction of will and action; but the individual is also the intelligence which sees and investigates all this. ([Emphasis added] Dilthey 1988: 98)

The individual is thus the centre of any inquiry about the social world. Both as interpreter and as interpretandum. It is actually at this point precisely, the difficulty of separating

¹²⁶ An example here from Simmel's aesthetic writings is useful in illustrating this idea. Simmel in his essay on Rodin, asserts that the essence of modernity is its psychologism where the experience of the social world is interpreted according to the interior reactions of the fluid state of the soul. (Simmel 1990: 103).

subject from object, where the question of the psychic elements of the individual come into the picture. The subjective elements in the observer lead to a proclivity towards interpreting phenomena (in our case, other interacting individuals), in a unique way, partially or wholly shaped from the hierarchy of the subjective contents in the mind of the observer. The concomitant implications of this epistemological diagnosis, lie in the subjective character of perception, and inevitably interpretation of an object of study :

Each [individual effort] is defined by the relation of a knowing subject and its historical horizon to a specific group of facts likewise limited in its range by a fixed horizon. For each of them the object exists only from the same point of view. Each is thus a definitive relative way of seeing and knowing its object. The one who enters into these labors they confront him as a chaos of relativities. Subjectivity [is] the modern way of viewing things. (Dilthey 1988: 327)

This subjectivism is tantamount to perspectivism. The object is perceived from different angles, and the different perceptions of it might intersect at some points but they can never be identical because perceptions are culture-, time-, individual-bound. The implications of subjectivism are evident in relativism. However, I will turn to relativism at a later stage, since the nature of historical understanding has to be clarified first.

Perhaps another means of illustrating the way in which the method of the human sciences proceeds, is to look at their goals and objectives at a very general and unified manner of course, without succumbing to the distinction between various disciplines :

The goals of the human sciences - to lay hold of the singular and the individual in historico-social reality; to recognize uniformities operative in shaping the singular; to establish goals and rules for its continued development - can be attained only by the devices of reason : analysis and observation. Abstract expression, in which one ignores some aspects of a state of affairs and develops others, is not the exclusive final goal of these sciences, but it is their indispensable means. (Dilthey 1988: 91-92)

Consider the above statement by Dilthey. A method of analysis and abstraction which is peculiar to the human sciences by distinguishing the general from the unique, utilizing each for its own purposes. In other words, the general characteristics or traits of unique historical or social objects of study, are subjected to a process of selection - a sort of interpretation - according to which certain of these exhibited traits acquire a more generally applicable status which transcends specific individual, cultural and temporal boundaries. It is interesting here to see the relevance of Simmel's construction of types. The most practically palpable idea of formal sociology is perhaps the formulation of social types. The typology of certain traits which seem to be common in individuals throughout

time and throughout locations, is what Dilthey, anticipating Simmel holds to be the methodology of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. These intersecting characteristics are elevated into a form of generally applicable features which transcend spatio-temporal boundaries. Prevalent social types are for example, according to Simmel, the stranger, the adventurer, the aristocrat, the bourgeois, the poor, the feminine, the masculine, the blasé, the greedy, to name but a few. A constellation of preponderant elements observed among individuals, constitutes the measuring rod for selecting and constructing types, useful in yielding information about socially universal characteristics. It is precisely Dilthey's method of abstraction through interpretation of psychic phenomena, social relations etc., that Simmel uses in order to complete the formulation of the epistemological categories of social types. The notion of types applies also to history. Models are created through the selection of some elements which are initially intertwined in the web of socio-historical reality. As we have already said, for Dilthey every special science has its origins in this process :

Even history ignores the features of the lives of individual men and of society which, in the period to be described, are the same as those of all other periods; its eye is directed toward the distinctive and the singular. (Dilthey 1988: 92)

This quote of Dilthey is extremely important for it illustrates the fundamental similarity with Simmel which is though, not immediately perceptible. The distinctive and unique attributes or characteristics are the ones which give rise to the heterogeneous nature of history. So implies Dilthey. Simmel maintains exactly the same. The features of the lives of individual men would be for Simmel the objectification of certain psychological motives. Since though, most of them are only potentially active in men but do not always materialize, they are neglected by the historian. He concentrates only on the manifestation of these psychological motives in distinct acts which belong to a certain cultural sphere (religion, economics, politics etc.). It is this manifestation and subsequent objectification of the psychological motives of man which form history and society.¹²⁷

Dilthey formulated the patterns of knowing along the axis of understanding. He attempted through this notion to revolutionize the discourse not only in history but also in the whole of social sciences. The underlying premises of this methodological principle are life, experience, interpretation and the objective spirit. It is important to see how Dilthey's so-called relativism evolved out of such methodology :

¹²⁷ In relation to this method, Simmel's positions are harmonious with Dilthey's. He writes:"[...] the observable activities and expressions of an individual are understood insofar as they are motivated. Put another way, the mental processes of this individual are understood by reference to the observable manifestations which are ascribed to them." (Simmel, 1980 : 98-99)

What we once were and how we have developed in such wise as to become what we are now is something we learn from how we have acted, what life-plans we once conceived, how we were active in an occupation, from old correspondance, from judgements about us which were expressed long ago. In short, it is the process of understanding [Verstehen] whereby life in its depths achieves illumination about itself. On the other side, we understand [...] ourselves and others only because we introduce our own lived experience of life [...] into every kind of expression of our own life and that of others. Thus the combination of lived experience, expression and understanding [Erleben, Ausdruck und Verstehen] is the specific process whereby mankind exists for us as an object of the human sciences. Hence the human sciences are grounded in this connection of life, expression, and understanding. (Dilthey 1988: 23-24)

We thought it was necessary to quote Dilthey at length here, since he includes in this passage all the elements which form his epistemological doctrine. The subjectivity with which we treat past experience and the experience of others is the way through which the individual is led to an understanding of himself and where he stands in life. The mysterious nature of life manifests itself in expressions (signs) which are to be understood through the subject's process of experiencing or rather re-experiencing (*Nacherlebnis*) the past through the present. Life is distilled into the human consciousness through expressions, signs, hints and symbols which are infiltrated with meaning in order to provide a frame of reference for the individual existence. The process through which these elements of life become comprehensible is understanding. It is actually, artificially dissected into two forms which are hierarchically structured. Thus, Dilthey distinguishes between the elementary and the higher forms of understanding. Expressions in the form of signs and symbols give rise to the feasibility of any sort of interpretation or understanding, since whatever is given in the world is given in the form of expressions. The scattered images of the world become a coherent picture only when we proceed in understanding the mental contents manifested through expressions. The elementary, or what I would call proto-forms of understanding, inhere in the concept of utility. It is the necessities of practical life which determine whether a certain pattern of understanding is to be preferred from another. Thus, the criteria according to which the individual proceeds in building patterns of understanding arise from the necessities of life. Life again, is the primordial force which is in permanent flux, and establishes the necessary preconditions which determine what is to be regarded as knowledge.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ The insistence of Dilthey with life as the pathfinder of humanity is captured in the following quotation : "From the standpoint of life no proof can be obtained by proceeding beyond what is contained in consciousness to something transcendent. We are only analyzing that which belief in the external world rests upon in life itself. Life gives the fundamental preconditions of knowledge, and thinking cannot reach behind them. It may test and investigate them from the angle of the extent of their realization in science.

These elementary forms which are just "interpretations of single expressions", provide the starting point for the creation of the web of relationships between interpretations of expressions which ultimately form the human culture. These develop on a basis of archetypal principles which are gradually obscured by the evolution and the multiple affiliation of various forms of understanding. The gradual objectification of symbols and signs leads, according to Dilthey, to the higher forms of understanding whereby the individual has to refer to a rather limited background of knowledge. This body of knowledge is typified along the exhibition and the eventual sharing of common characteristics. It is through this process where the

placing of individual expressions into a common context is facilitated by the articulated order in the objective mind [...] [it] embraces particular homogeneous systems like law and religion, which have a firm, regular structure. (Dilthey 1976: 222)

Higher forms of understanding, although allowing a wider communication between individuals, have to refer frequently to the general context of life in order to be established as fully meaningful. For example, a certain contradiction in the agents' means of communicating an idea, provides the stimulus for a reference to more general contexts aiming at the verification of this idea. When a person's sayings seem to be incompatible with what we know to be the information about him, then anomaly arises. That is, "facial expressions, gestures and moods contradict the mental content", and for this reason "we must consider other expressions or go back to the whole context of life in order to still our doubts."¹²⁹

But the transition from what we have defined as elementary or proto-forms of understanding to the higher ones, is achieved only through relations, themselves established by combinations. It is to the extent that these combinations work that relations are set up. Thus, they result in common connections which we use as reference points when there is a discrepancy in our interpretation of a mental act. Dilthey maintains that

the doctrine of the difference between elementary and higher forms of understanding here put forward justifies the traditional distinction between pragmatic and historical interpretation by basing the difference on **the relation - inherent in understanding - between its elementary and higher forms.** ([Emphasis added] Dilthey 1976:

But they are hence not hypotheses but principles or preconditions arising out of life which enter science as the means to which they are tied. [...] ", later on he adds, :"[...] the knowledge value of the antithesis of subject and object is not that of a transcendent fact : the subject and otherness or externality are nothing else than that which is contained and given in the experiences of life itself. This is all reality." (Dilthey in Lukács, 1980 : 420).

¹²⁹ Dilthey,(1976 : 223)

It seems that for Dilthey understanding is a relational concept. In other words, that the process of transformation from the elementary to the higher forms of understanding is only a relative one. The reason being that the construction of meaningful sequences, rests only on a certain combination. When it comes for example to words which are for Dilthey both "determined and undetermined", each word contains several meanings. Since "the means of syntactically relating these words are also, within limits ambiguous", then, "meaning arises when the indeterminate is determined by a construction".¹³⁰ The modes of combination or relation between mental contents, symbols, signs etc., are precisely the process which determines meaning and makes the transition and eventual proliferation of forms of understanding possible. The relationism implicit in Dilthey is more evident in the following assertion :

All thought consists in relating things ; all relating presupposes contents which are related. (Dilthey 1988: 332)

But thought processes are not the same in all individuals. They are relative, and their relativity stems from the combinations through which contents are given some kind of form in order to be translated to a meaningful structure useful for the individual.¹³¹ Additionally, Dilthey writes :

Everything is relative, the only thing which is absolute is the nature of spirit itself which manifests itself in all of these things. And for a knowledge of the nature of the spirit there is no terminus, no final apprehension, each is relative, each has been sufficient if it has sufficed for its time. (Dilthey in Mandelbaum 1967: 59)

The prevalent historicism of Dilthey shouldn't surprise us since it is complemented by his principle of life as the driving force behind history which creates different needs for different eras. If we ignore for a moment the Kantian echoes in Dilthey's scheme, it becomes apparent that irrationalism and agnosticism govern his life-philosophy. If life is heterogeneous and strives constantly against ossification, then how is it possible for the

¹³⁰ Dilthey, (1976 : 231)

¹³¹ The epistemological consequences of this assertion are discernible in Simmel, according to whom the meaningful transition from the raw material of life to forms of understanding is a) de facto deficient in meaning, since it cannot be the exact copy of what is given in the first place, but precisely for this reason is b) creative in meaning since it gives rise to new needs for explanation. Simmel actually says : "[...] it is necessary to make clear that every form of knowledge represents a translation of immediately given data into a new language with its own intrinsic forms, categories and requirements." (Simmel, 1977 : 77)

mental content, the raw material of life, to amalgamate in forms or systems which are permanent? Again Dilthey's answer would spring from the historicist elements of his thought. Art, for example, as a permanent taxonomy which satisfies and explains different contents of life, is contingent in the particular historical period in which it has evolved. In other words, the painting of Ancient Greece and the painting of Bosch, interpret human nature differently, but they both belong to the same formal-epistemological category of art. Actually, it is the psychological ramifications of human nature, which have to be used as the frame of reference for the evaluation and appreciation of the cultural tendencies of an epoch in which the work of art (or any other cultural artifact) is created. This is a rather delicate point in our analysis for it reveals a subtle yet highly significant divergence between Dilthey and Simmel. What we have just mentioned in the context of art as the expression of the human soul and its eventual use as an explanatory tool in any sociological analysis of art, reflects Simmel's sympathy for psychological treatments of social phenomena.¹³² Dilthey's failure to escape from the importance of naturalistic explanations of society, is clearly reflected in the following extract where he actually distances himself from the Simmelian overemphasis on the psychological presuppositions of sociological explanations :

I myself (before Simmel) already characterized external organization of society as a special sphere in which, viewed psychologically, relations of dominance and dependence and community relations are operative. My view is different from Simmel's principally inasmuch as I cannot simply trace these combinatory forces to the psychic moments mentioned; on the contrary, I regard the natural organization of the sexual community, procreation, the ensuing homogeneity of the family and race, and on the other hand communal living in the same place as equally important. (Dilthey 1988: 333)

Dilthey distances himself on the grounds that natural causes ought to be taken significantly into account for an adequate sociological perspective of human life. To say that Simmel reduces social interaction to psychological reactions is a somewhat unfair and far-fetched statement. In fact, Simmel's operational boundaries or categories seem to be much wider, since they embrace a larger nexus of social relationships which verify the

¹³² Simmel, clearly, suggests the fundamental importance of psychological explanation in sociology. He writes : "The method according to which the problems of sociation are to be investigated are the same as in all comparative psychological sciences. As a foundation there exist certain psychological presuppositions that belong to them without which no historical science can exist : the phenomena of seeking and giving help, of love and hate, of avarice and the sense of satisfaction in communal existence, the self-preservation of individuals with the same interests, on the one hand, through competition, on the other, through combination, and a series of other primary psychological processes must be presupposed in order that one can at all understand how sociations, group formations, relations of individuals to a whole entity, etc., came about."(Simmel in Frisby, 1992 : 33). For a typical case of Simmel's application of this method, see his "The Philosophy of Money "(1978 : 238-258).

sociological observation by reference to psychological categories. Simmel does not conflate sociology and psychology. He uses both realms in order to depict as accurately as possible the social world, without though fully succumbing to neither of explanations.

We have seen how Dilthey's epistemology deviates from the mainstream of sociological thought which was strongly affiliated with positivism. Dilthey sought to establish a system of knowledge which was meant to be the most effective, but yet was entirely based on irrationalism and agnosticism. Experience (*Erleben*) is the criterion of knowledge within the human reach. It is grasped through understanding which proceeds from its elementary to the higher forms, a process which is rendered feasible by empathy and interpretation. If man's need-dispositions and quest for knowledge extend beyond this pattern, then Dilthey has only to offer agnosticism. An aetiological explanation of this assertion would lead to the negation of reason as the property of the intellect capable of grasping and understanding life in its totality. This deification of life in relation to the whole of Dilthey's epistemology is succinctly illustrated in the following fragment :

Life, itself, liveliness, behind which I cannot penetrate, contains structural connections from which all experiencing and thinking is explained. And this is the decisive factor for the whole possibility of knowing. There is a knowledge of reality only because the full structural coherence which emerges in the forms, principles and categories of thinking is contained in life and experience, and because this coherence can be shown analytically in life and experience. (Dilthey in Lukács 1980: 418)

The world is not known as such because any such knowledge would imply an extension beyond life which is inconceivable. The objectivity of the world rests on the procedure according to which we follow steps as if the world whose knowledge we aim at, is true or objective. The "structural coherence", i.e. the whole edifice of understanding, is relative but also absolute to our eyes since we can neither overcome ourselves and "see" what lies beyond life, nor can we go back to the elementary principles which give rise to the higher forms of understanding, since these have been obfuscated by the labyrinth of interrelations between the mental contents-to-be-known, and the hierarchical structure of understanding which aims for this realization.

Dilthey's relativization of knowledge has further implications. Especially for world views and philosophies. The reason being that :

World views develop under different conditions, climate, races, nationalities determined by history and through political organization, the time-bound confines of epochs and eras. All of them combine into the special conditions which mark from the outset a multiple growth of world views. As life develops under such diversified conditions, it is indeed diverse [...] and so is man who conceives of life. (Dilthey 1978:

In other words, the way we are thrown in a society determines the world view which is going to prevail. Dilthey feels that "every genuine philosophy (*weltanschauung*) is an intuition springing from the state of being-within-life (*Darinnensein im Leben*)".¹³³ But since the "state of being-within-life" is not identical in any person and it does not transcend boundaries (personal, cultural etc.), but only intersects with boundaries, then we can assume that any world-view is valid only for its own advocates. Life determines the mental contents endorsed in every world-view or philosophy, but life is experienced in different ways by individuals. In this, Dilthey is similar to Simmel, Bergson and perhaps Fichte.¹³⁴

We have seen how life as an irrational force has undermined understanding and interpretation. The transition from subjectivism to relativism is achieved through the irrationality and incommensurability of life. Even experience (*Erleben*) which is the only way possible for the amelioration of human understanding, should be conceived as the penultimate vision within the human reach. Dilthey corroborates this view, by asserting that :

[...] there is an irrational element in all understanding, just as life itself is irrational; it cannot be represented by formulae arrived at by logical processes. **And an ultimate though completely subjective certainty that lies in this re-experiencing (*Nacherleben*) can find no substitute in an examination of the knowledge value of the chains of reasoning by which the process of understanding may be represented.** The very nature of understanding imposes these limits on its logical treatment. ([Emphasis added] Dilthey in Lukács 1980: 426)

It is difficult to discuss Dilthey's writings on history without necessarily resorting to his general epistemology which as we have seen, expands into other disciplines as well. An attempt towards the realization of such a task could prove detrimental for the clear understanding of his philosophy in general. The reason being that history and

¹³³ Dilthey in Lukács (1980 : 436)

¹³⁴ To what extent there is a similarity with Simmel, we shall see in the next section. As far as Bergson is concerned, in his *Creative Evolution* we find the following comment : "Hence the exaggerated confidence of philosophy in the powers of the individual mind. Whether it is dogmatic or critical, whether it admits the relativity of our knowledge or claims to be established within the absolute, a philosophy is generally the work of a philosopher, a single and unitary vision of the whole. It is to be taken or left." (Bergson, 1911 : 201). The case of Fichte is a more ambiguous one and we feel more skeptical. Oakes makes an interesting analogy between Fichte and Simmel : "Recalling Fichte's remark that the kind of philosophy one has depends upon the kind of man he is, Simmel claims that the same holds much more generally : ' the kind of knowledge that humanity has at any given moment is dependent upon what humanity is in this moment" (Oakes in his "Introduction: Simmel's Problematic", in Simmel (1977 : 22)

philosophy are closely linked in Dilthey's thought, both playing vital roles in the formulation and expression of his postulates.

The attempt of any world view, philosophy or system of metaphysics to struggle against each other and dominate human life, is destined to futility for Dilthey, because they are no more than objectified forms of the psychological manifestation of life-experience in human thought. Beyond this idea lie relativism and historicism. Their perfect reconciliation is captured in the following quotation :

[...] into this structural uniformity of world-views and their differentiation into disparate forms, enters, however, an incalculable factor - the variations of life, the succession of eras, the changes in science, and the variability of the mind of nations and of individuals : as a result, the interest in problems and the power of certain ideas as they grow out of history and yet dominate it, is subject to incessant change. **There is a permanent renewal of combinations of life experience**, sentiments and ideas within a given world-view, prevailing in a certain period of history and in its context. ([Emphasis added] Dilthey 1978: 28-29)

This life-philosophy reaches its apogee in Simmel who infiltrated it into a more rigorous body of work. Thus, the relevance of Dilthey's vitalism and relativism will be more appropriately elaborated through Simmel's extensive analyses of historical understanding. Despite the substantial differences which separate the two thinkers, it is clear from our discussion so far, that there are many links in their works, more than previously assumed. The brave attempt by Dilthey to reformulate the epistemological discourse of Kantianism on the basis of an all-pervasive vitalism, proved fruitful for the further development of these ideas, since they were taken much further by Simmel. And the identical theme of both thinkers cannot be better illustrated than in their idea that everything has its roots in life which however, "goes on, bringing forth ever new forms"¹³⁵

V. Simmel : Life, History and Relativism

In Simmel most of the positions endorsed by Dilthey, acquire a further dimension. The vicissitudes of life and its corollaries, attain a more pragmatic status since they are analyzed within the framework of history and sociology. It is through the application of Dilthey's ideas in the philosophy of history and in social theory that render Simmel's outlook a vigorous epistemological theory.

¹³⁵ Dilthey, (1978 : 30).

Simmel suggests that interpretation is a synthetic process. It provides the bridge between two disparate elements. The first is the object-to-be-interpreted (interpretandum), and the second is the subject, the interpreter for whom the object is the interpretandum. Interpretation is the methodological process by which we are led to the understanding and eventual experience of an event or a person. In our case, Simmel draws on the process of understanding another person within the context of history. Three elements are important here. First, that the observation of manifested psychological states of the individual provide the key for the process of understanding, which has to be extended beyond mere observation in order to gain access to the motives behind the act. Second, by means of analogies, the act of the person can be "understood by reference to another act on the same psychological plain".¹³⁶ This is the precursor to Simmel's theory of types, whereby a reference network is established, for the unravelling of common traits between individuals, despite the fact that they may belong to different historical eras. Third, the negation of a mechanistic theory of interpretation forms an integral part in Simmel's notion of historical understanding. Clearly, historical interpretation inheres in the historian who attempts to reconstruct and construe past events. Any piecemeal process which gathers fragments of information pertinent to the object of the interpretative process, and attempts to fully reconstruct it in an identical manner is not only futile but absurd. Vitalism and the concept of experience, undermine the mechanistic model of understanding past events. It is thus, evident for Simmel that

historical understanding is an activity of the subject, the historian. It is dependent upon the categories and forms which are employed to represent the object of interpretation [...] The truth of an interpretation is a vital and functional relationship between the interpretation and its object. It is the result of an active process, not a mechanical reproduction of a photographic plate. (Simmel 1980: 125-126)

Interpretation, is therefore, conceived as a "distinctive mental construct", which is intrinsic in the subject. Since it is partial and incomplete, it is a new entity, a new language of symbols. However, Simmel is perceptive enough, to avoid dogmatism in asserting the above position. He accepts the enormous difficulties arising from the multiplicity of factors which have to be taken into account in delineating with clarity and certainty the process of historical understanding. Although an enemy of skepticism, Simmel acknowledges the problems in any attempt to clearly define understanding (especially in relation to history), an uncertainty which derives from the irrational character of understanding itself, as this was identified by Dilthey. Let us look closely to

¹³⁶ Simmel, (1980 : 109)

the following quotation, which I feel is of the utmost importance; Simmel concludes his discussion of understanding maintaining that :

In these divergent interpretations of the process of understanding, the entire antithesis between a mechanistic and an organic or vitalistic perspective becomes clear. Like every intellectual controversy which is pursued to its ultimate source, **the conclusions which we reach concerning this antithesis are dependent upon the most profound and comprehensive commitments of our world view.** ([Emphasis added] Simmel 1980: 126)

The conclusion which Simmel has reached and is here referring to, is that the mechanistic model offers us a bizarre and absurd undertaking, while the vitalistic version offers a more adequate and perhaps logically sound framework for historical understanding. However, this conclusion has its roots, as Simmel asserts, in the most deep-seated premises of **a world-view inherent in the subject!** What Simmel actually says here is that there is evidence for what he believes to be the case, but he may be wrong! This shouldn't surprise us since Simmel asserts that only the unprovable is beyond dispute. His attitude emanates from the relativism which permeates his philosophy. Is this then, another version of the total relativism of Protagoras, where "man is the measure of all things"? Or is it just a milder view reminiscent of Fichte's solipsism ? Perhaps Simmel adheres to Bergsonism and the philosopher's vision which is to be taken or left! In fact, this passage is indicative of the relativistic character of world-views espoused by Simmel. It's closely linked to the fermentation of life and to the process of selection by the individual-subject, of the symbols which would lead to an interpretation wholly determined by the subject's need-dispositions. Simmel writes:

[...] the goal of our thoughts is to find what is steadfast and reliable behind ephemeral appearances and the flux of events ; and to advance from mutual dependence to self-sufficiency and independence. In this way we attain the fixed points that can guide us through the maze of phenomena, and that **represent the counterpart of what we conceive in ourselves as valuable and definitive.** ([Emphasis added] Simmel 1978: 102)

By subjecting every philosophy or system of thought to pure subjectivity, Simmel demolishes every world-view as preponderant, including his own. The criteria by which we form theories and views in general, are part of a selective process which attempts to give coherence and meaning to the abyss of phenomena which inhere in life. These criteria apparently function on the basis of individual benefit. Accordingly, since individuals have different needs, selective processes tend to vary, resulting therefore to totally disparate world-views and cultures. Let us see however, how this relativism

evolves out of Simmel's philosophy. He assumes an existential problem : the individual, thrown into the world is faced with a plethora of stimuli. To survive in such a chaos of images, he has to take certain things for granted. He has to absolutize them, and use them as pivotal points for his further development. In other words, his existence is possible only if he assumes knowledge of certain things and proceed as if they were absolutes. Simmel actually says :

we are constantly orienting ourselves, even when we do not employ abstract concepts, to an "over us" and an "under us", to a right and a left, to a more or less, a tighter or looser, a better or worse. The boundary, above and below, is our means for finding direction in the infinite space of our worlds. (Simmel 1971: 353)

The web of relationships which gives rise to ideas such as "better" or "worse", is the guideline through which we proceed in the world. The individual is helpless, unless he ignores certain aspects of life and proceeds according to the aspects which are useful or potentially useful to him. This level of selectivity towards the contents of life is not only necessary but it is perhaps inevitable; and it is inevitable because the stream of life can only partially and fragmentary understood or experienced. Simmel makes this point directly :

Beyond a certain limit of depth, the lines of being, volition and moral feeling collide so radically and violently that they would inevitably tear us apart. Only by not allowing them beyond that mark can one keep them sufficiently separated for life to be possible. (Simmel in Lukács 1980: 458)

This level of superficiality is attained only through selection of certain principles at the expense of others. Only by this way can we formulate anything substantial and meaningful, only by clicking in to what seems compatible with the nature of our being. By relatively neglecting counter-information, we develop our theories which no matter how sophisticated and advanced they might be, they still are from a certain perspective superficial and tentative. In life-experience, it is possible, according to Simmel, to find arguments for verification and refutation of every theory or world-view. The empirical existence is so rich in contents that actually all concepts and ideas can be disputed but by the same token substantially grounded. Each pivotal thesis

can become the focal point of a cosmology that excludes the others. The fragmentary and partial character of our conceptual schemes has the following consequence. When a given conceptual scheme is applied to the universe as a whole, it must be supplemented by one or more other conceptual schemes. Therefore each conceptual scheme has a relative

justification which metaphysics makes absolute. (Simmel 1977: 122)

For Simmel, the social sciences would be an analogous case. The sociological problematic, for example, can only exist if other perspectives - such as the political, the psychological, the religious - are partially or wholly eliminated. Similarly, a psychological analysis can only afford a reference to the sociological plane up to a certain degree, in order to be able to have a starting point. Otherwise it enters a labyrinth with no exit. The case of history is for Simmel subject to the same insoluble problem which stems from the relativity of all knowledge. This point is accentuated by the fusion of forms which render one's life fully comprehensible. For example, logically, the life of Hitler can be fully understood, only if we gain access to the psychological processes of his personality, his mental states which gave rise to his political actions. In addition, the whole nexus of social, historical, political and other elements surrounding Hitler's personality should be taken into account. However, this is not feasible. Hitler the child, Hitler the husband, Hitler the politician, Hitler the megalomaniac, Hitler the scholar, are all different facets of the same personality. And despite the fact that they intersect in many points, certain aspects of Hitler the individual have to be neglected in order to be able to grasp substantially his life from a particular angle. To the political scientist, the so-called lunacy or megalomania of Hitler, or his relationship with Eva Braun, might be information totally irrelevant to the political aspect of Hitler's life. The personality which is the focal point of a certain study, has to be dissected in order for the observer to be able to gain some sort of insight to the life of this personality. And what we call Hitler today, is the combination and simultaneous application of the fragmented knowledge we possess about the different sides of his life. However, each side is possible only at the expense of others. Simmel is unequivocal in demonstrating the epistemological impasse which surrounds any attempt to bring into light an event or a personality in its totality :

A political decision is obviously an event that is produced by psychological causes. The following are necessary conditions for the understanding of such an event : all the actual conditions that exist in the mind of the actor, conditions that comprehend his entire life, including all of its extra-political aspects [...] All of these considerations are irrelevant to the political historian. For his purposes, he produces a hypothetical construct : the political actor. This construct disregards the existential continuity between political activity and all other circumstances of life : it is as if they did not even exist. The political historian conceives his hero as if he were an exclusively political animal; he focuses upon the political aspects of conduct. In reality, of course, political activity only takes place within the psychological context of the extra-political factors just mentioned, but the political historian ignores this context. (Simmel 1977: 206)

The incomplete and disunited character of the forms of knowledge, is clearly expressed in the above statement by Simmel. Since forms explain contents in a different manner pertaining to reality, then we can assume that different forms give rise to different realities. The politician operates in a reality determined by the form of politics. The painter accordingly, functions in a realm, the contents of which are understood through art. Simmel, however does not exclude the case of intersection between these different spheres. On the contrary, he advocates that indeed the formal categories of knowledge intersect but they can never be identical, for this would imply knowledge of the whole which is impossible.¹³⁷ To embrace the totality of reality would be meaningless. Human nature is finite and so is man's capacity to classify contents, analyze them and understand them in their totality. Even within a certain form, art for example, our knowledge is partial, since there are even diverse expressions of the art form (painting, music, sculpture, dance etc.), each one with its own intricacies and secrets. The popular saying which states that one can be good only at one craft but not all crafts, despite its cliché overtones, finds its applicability in the limited potential of man for any comprehensive understanding. This idea is based on two levels : a) we are only capable as humans of grasping a portion of life through understanding, and experience, and b) that life which manifests itself in contents, is not a stable unity, but a relative one in constant flux, creating new forms of understanding. Even in the case of geniuses, a certain level of shallow and peripheral knowledge is maintained, for the essence of life is beyond total comprehension.

These themes recur constantly in Simmel's works. It is interesting though to examine in what way they are related to history as a science and as a form of knowledge. The proposition of Simmel that forms are partial, acquires here a more radical status. The vitalism and historicism in his theory operate as mutual epistemological principles each one complementing the other. The problems in historical understanding arise from the value-ladenness of the observer. Without asserting that value-freedom is either feasible or desirable, Simmel points again to the selective and partial character of any interpretation of historical events. The qualitative properties of history which are selected by the historian (we are left here with a question-mark as to whether the events are selected because they are distinctive, or whether they are distinctive precisely because of their selection), determine the particular qualitative character of the historical account to be given. The perspectivism encountered previously, is overtly displayed here as well. Simmel

¹³⁷ This idea is better illustrated in relation to Simmel's previous example about the political historian. Simmel writes : "Each moment in [a person's] political life is also dependent upon the general disposition of his character and transitory moods. His political life is completely intelligible only in relation to his life as a whole. Knowledge of his life as whole, however, is impossible for any science ; so the historian constructs a new, synthetic concept : politics" (Simmel, 1977 : 81)

suggests that

there is no knowledge as such : knowledge is possible only insofar as it is produced and structured by constitutive concepts that are qualitatively determined [...] This is the deeper reason why there are only histories, but no history as such. What we call universal history or world history can at best be the simultaneous application of a variety of these differential problematics. Or, on the other hand, it may be the sort of history which throws into relief **the aspects of the event which are more significant or important from the perspective of our sense of value.** ([Emphasis added] Simmel 1977: 82-83)

History as an amalgam of the historians' preferences is presented to us here from a relativistic angle. Thus, that events can be stripped of their genetic importance and uniqueness and be placed alongside the everyday trivialities, is the tempting conclusion about to be inferred from Simmel's reasoning. However, Simmel is cautious not to make himself the agent of total relativism, a destructive relativism, a relativism which is the precursor to nihilism. The meaninglessness of human existence is skilfully avoided by Simmel, since he switches the argument into idealism, essentialism, and the transcendence of historical meaning. The reader bearing in mind the previous quotation by Simmel might be surprised to read also that for him,

the "subjectivity" of history as a form does not entail that historical concepts are employed in an arbitrary fashion - just to the contrary. As a consequence of the ideal or - as it might be put - teleological relationship between history as a form and the heterogeneity of reality as it is actually experienced, this "subjectivity" is located within a latitude that has definite limits. (Simmel 1977: 208)

The implications of this assertion we shall examine towards the end of this section since, then, this quote will be placed within the more general idealistic premises of Simmel's philosophy. Simmel asserts that it is possible to understand the essence of a thing independently of "its historical genesis". What he says actually, and this is surprising since it is diametrically opposed to historicism, is that both, for example, Heraclitus and Nietzsche attempted to provide answers to the same essential questions. The fact that there is a gap of several centuries between the historical periods in which they developed their world-views is of little significance. The essence of the questions they dealt with remains trans-historical and also the way they reacted to such questions. Simmel here reverses his previous reasoning. Whereas before in order to understand the political person, one has to have access to other aspects of his life as well, ideally speaking of course, in the case of the philosopher we gain knowledge of the person only through his philosophy. The task of every philosophy is to resolve the contradictions of life, to

amalgamate within a conceptual schema, the countless tensions between the elements of life, and to present a structure out of the diversity of contents. The immanent subjectivism of Simmel manifests itself in the actual claim that every philosophy "can be understood as the objectification of a certain type of human being". Simmel again resorts to relativism by asserting that philosophies are true in themselves since they represent "the response of a certain type of human being to the total impression of the universe".¹³⁸ The reader should recall that actually for Simmel, there are many histories valid in their own terms. By the same token we must infer that there are many philosophies which can neither be refuted nor transcended since they express the profound but entirely unique relationship between the individual and the cosmos.

Since history is no more than a synthetic notion, expressing the outcomes of subjectively interpreting historical events, then is it possible to look for an absolute in the idea of history itself? Simmel asserts, and this supports his epistemology, that

[...] the question of whether we see some kind of progress in history is dependent upon an ideal. The value of this ideal cannot be identified in the field of history. Its origins are extraneous to the historical process itself; they are necessarily subjective. (Simmel 1977: 178)

It is interesting to see here that history's epistemological status is parallel to that of other forms such as law, art etc. These cannot ascertain validity or truth by resorting only to other principles or theories within their boundaries. Their ultimate validity or explanation comes about not from within, but from principles extrinsic to the particular formal category. Law cannot entirely be explained by reference to legal principles only. The whole edifice of law is structured on a base whose ultimate criterion lies outside the confines of law. Similarly, the meaning of history lies outside itself. And accordingly, it is impossible to determine whether the absolute against which history is meaningful or not, is a true absolute or a mere subjectivity. Parenthetically here, it is worth seeing Simmel's presupposition which leads to such an assertion. In relation to history, he writes :

[...] the present, which is the indispensable key to the past, can itself be understood only through the past; and the past, which alone can help us to understand the present, is accessible only through the perceptions and sensibilities of the present. All historical images are the result of this mutuality of interpretative elements, none of which allows the others to come to rest. Ultimate comprehension is transferred to infinity, since every point in one series refers to the other series for its understanding. (Simmel 1978: 112)

¹³⁸ Simmel, (1980 : 198-204).

The nexus of relationships between the interpretative processes is a mere reflection of the intersection of the formal-epistemological categories of life. The historical images, representations of the material content of life, are no more than relational constructs. This type of relationism derives from Simmel's relativization of truth. He writes :

Truth means the relationship between representations, which may be realized as an infinite construction, since, even if our knowledge is based upon truths that are no longer relative, we can never know whether we have reached the really final stage, or whether we are again on the road to a more general and profound conception. (Simmel 1978: 114-115)

The agnosticism of Simmel which results in his treating every position as the penultimate one is a mere confirmation of the wedlock between skepticism and relationism. The continuous ramification of "systems of representations", in reciprocal and interactive elements which in their turn have to be treated as provisional because we can never know whether they are truly ultimate, undermines critically the very foundations of knowledge. Since knowledge is an infinite regress, it evades the human grasp and it is inevitably treated as a reified notion. The roots of our knowledge - perhaps what Dilthey called the elementary forms of understanding - are to be traced back according to Simmel to an abstruse notion of an absolute. Again, in order to illuminate the opaqueness of Simmel's "absolute" we have to see how he puts the subject across :

Relativism strives to dissolve into a relation every absolute that presents itself, and proceeds the same way with the absolute that offers itself as the ground for this new relation. This is a never-ending process whose heuristic eliminates the alternative : either to deny or to accept the absolute. It makes no difference how one expresses it : **either that there is an absolute but it can be grasped only by an infinite process, or that there are only relations but that they can only replace the absolute in an infinite process.** Relativism is able to make the radical concession that it is possible for the mind to place itself outside itself. ([Emphasis added] Simmel 1978: 117)

This is Simmel's epistemology in a nutshell. The Absolute which is sought as the criterion of legitimacy is, as we have seen earlier (chapter 2), replaced by relations which remove the possibility of its existence into infinity. This dialectic reaches its apogee in the form of a paradox covertly discernible in Simmel. The antinomy between the absolute and the relative is expressed in a permanent oscillation which is only provisionally resolved in the relative autonomy of historical periods. The escalation of this relativism occurs with the alternation of one "objective truth" for another, a succession which

apparently is historically conditioned. The conflict between universal laws and relative principles is reconciled under the idea of the "usefulness" of these laws for particular formal categories. The universal and stable criteria required to save the world of contents from a chaotic dissolution, are structured through the provisional preconditions which seem to be functional for a particular society. Simmel corroborates this view in the following extract from his gender writings :

In all areas of inner existence, as well as in those that arise from the cognitive and practical relationship of the inner self to the world, we invariably grasp the meaning and value of a single element in its relationship - or rather as its relationship - to another element. . . The two elements do not remain in this condition of relativity, however; rather, **one of them, alternating with the other, develops into an absolute that sustains or governs the relationship.** All of the great dichotomies of the spirit - the self and the world, subject and object, the individual and society, stability and motion, material and form. . . - have experienced this fate : Each aspect develops a comprehensive and profound meaning on the basis of which it encompasses **both its own limited significance and its polar antithesis as well.** ([Emphasis added] Simmel 1984: 102)

The repercussions of Simmel's assertion are manifold. One could argue, for example, that the balance of the mental energies of the world is held together by the artificial construction of universally valid laws. However, the "truth" of the particular law is sustained only by a certain type of relation between its elements, a relation which being subject to life's vicissitudes, is malleable and provisional. This reciprocity between the forces which maintain a relationship, is the only criterion for the qualitative properties of the elements of the relationship, and consequently it could be argued that it is the only criterion of knowledge. The necessarily hypothetical character of all propositions which are taken into account for the creation of a nomological criterion which is in turn advanced to a law, is again subjectively established as a pivotal point for the further construction of meaningful sequences. Or, in other words the transition of what Dilthey called elementary to higher forms of understanding, involves a level of superficiality or dogmatism which is used as the primary hypothesis for the development of human knowledge. Laws are just "provisional speculations", auxiliary tools for the transition of the world through the various unforeseeable stages of life. No law, whether historical, sociological, psychological etc., is ever ultimate or exhaustive. Simmel justifies this position as follows :

Inquiry begins with unanalysed phenomena that **are related according to superficial and one-sided similarities.** One of these resemblances is **putatively identified** as the substance and the law of others. Then a gradual process of specialized research takes

place which leads to knowledge of the elements of the cosmos and the primary forces which obtain between them. The uniform, law-like regularity of the universe lies exclusively in these elements and forces. ([Emphasis added] Simmel 1977: 120)

The similarity with Dilthey as to the evolution of nomological criteria of explanation is evident. These criteria, however, at the very root of their formation, are no more than subjective (instinctive?) reactions to external stimuli, reactions which are psychologically determined. They resonate the primordial human conception of the energies of life, the human's struggle to tame them in order to understand them. During the evolution and subsequent sophistication of forms of understanding, reality acquires a further dimension since it comprises of intersecting but ultimately incommensurable processes. The only way to cope with life's irrationality is to neglect some of its aspects and rationalize and develop others (an analogy here with the growth of belief in science and scientific technique in the Western world, and a parallel decline in the belief in religious institutions shows clearly the extreme rationalization of life as a whole, a process which if seen within the general Simmelian reasoning, can be identified as the tragedy of culture rooted in life-philosophy). This is how "knowledge" proceeds for Simmel. History is a similar case: the totality of intersecting contents is only palpable through a reduction to methodologically logical formulas and distinctions. Where the organic character of history is debased into mechanical explanation, the dynamic essence of life becomes a mere formalization, and the evolution of life and history is translated to mere alternation of typified events and historical patterns. The contradictory nature of historical understanding and the historical process in general, is captured in Simmel's methodology of history. The simultaneously analytical and synthetic functions of historical understanding present us actually with the paradox of life. It is dissected in order to be grasped, and then synthesized in order to be coherently understood.¹³⁹

The epistemological paradox for Simmel is this : the permanent oscillation of human perception and human knowledge between the absolute and the relative, the object and the subject, the individual and the cosmos, the social and the psychic. A permanent solution is ruled out for Simmel. The contents of each notion alternate with each other and they are given often the status of a form. The absolute and the relative are no more than heuristic principles. In fact the objectification of the psychic processes of the individual is the only criterion we possess in order to "advance" our fragmentary knowledge, a

¹³⁹ Simmel unfolds here the contradictory character of history : "On the one hand, history - by employing an integral idea as a principle - synthesizes data that are temporally discrete and fragmentary into a continuous whole [...] On the other hand, history is obliged to destroy the real continuity which subsists within any given temporal process. It is even obliged to abstract this temporal process as a whole from the continuity of the cosmic and human sequence of events." (Simmel, 1980 : 194)

criterion which we treat as if it is an accurate measure of reality. The implications of his epistemological doctrine can be clearly defined for social science. The intersection of social circles in social life is tantamount to the negation of self-contained methodological categories which in order to gain autonomous status, become detached from reality and claim absolute validity. The fact that everything is related to everything else reflects not a methodological nihilism but on the contrary a positive contribution to the social scientific epistemology. The fecundity of Simmel's proposition lies on the fact that only a sociology of combinations, is likely to contribute to the deepening of human perception of the social world. What we call society is no more than a multiple nexus of intersecting categories which acquire an objectified status through distinctive patterns of communication and interaction. The primary relations between these components are the ones which require description and identification, and this is possible through the extension of the insight of the sociologist in other explanatory realms. In fact what Simmel achieves through his epistemological doctrine, is a transcendence of idealism through pragmatism. In other words, methodological agnostic pessimism is overcome by a melancholic optimism, an optimism aware of its limitations but ready to contribute by the most profound and detailed descriptions, to an understanding of reality.

To recapitulate, I feel it is useful to quote Simmel once more, at some length this time, in order to demonstrate his major epistemological anxieties which I have tried to expose so far in my discussion :

Despite the stress of the ever-advancing and immeasurable progress of our knowledge, it should not be overlooked that at the other end. . . much that we formerly possessed as "sure" knowledge is sinking into doubt and recognized error. How much medieval man "knew", and the enlightened thinker of the eighteenth century or the materialistic scientific researcher of the nineteenth, which for us is either completely obsolete or at least completely dubious. How much of that which is now undoubted "knowledge" will suffer the same fate sooner or later! The effect of man's whole spiritual and practical disposition is that [...] **he apprehends only that which matches his convictions and simply overlooks the counter-examples however startling** : a fact totally inexplicable to later eras. Proofs no less "factual" and "convincing" were adduced for astrology and miracle cures, for witchcraft and the direct efficacy of prayer as are now adduced for the validity of universal laws of nature. And I by no means exclude the possibility that later centuries or millenia perceiving as the core and essence of each individual phenomenon **its indissoluble unified individuality**, not ascribable to "universal laws", will declare such generalities to be as much of a superstition as the aforesaid articles of faith. **Once we have abandoned the idea of the "absolutely true", which is likewise only a historical construction, we might arrive at the paradoxical idea that in the continuous process of perception, the standard of the truths newly adopted differs only in degree from the standard of errors**

we have abolished ; that, as in a never-halting procession, just as many "true" perceptions mount the front steps as "illusions" are cast down the back steps. ([Emphasis added] Simmel in Lukács 1980: 445)

I have used history as a form in this chapter to illustrate the main presuppositions of Simmel's epistemology in relation also to his predecessor, Dilthey. The deviations from Simmel's purely historical writings served the purpose of providing a comprehensive picture of his ideas at the points where reference to history was made. Before though we conclude, let us very briefly examine the reception of Simmel's writings in the philosophy of history by eminent scholars from the field of social sciences.

VI. Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to expose the affinities between the thought of Dilthey and Simmel, on the grounds that they both adhered to the prevalent philosophy of the times, namely vitalism, and that both used history as an example for the elaboration of their theories.

I assumed it was more useful to expand the discussion, and instead of providing a strictly limited and obstrusive version of historical interpretation, to relate the whole topic to both thinkers' epistemological edifice. The negation of historical and universal laws, the impossible reduction of the individual to a general typology, the ideal notion of the absolute which is extra-historical, the relational essence of truth as well as the relativistic character of world-views as a consequence of the biased nature of all selection and perception, I hope I have treated adequately and have related them to both Dilthey and Simmel. These themes I demonstrated, point to the general need for a reappraisal of his historical writings for a relativistic epistemology.

Finally, my idea that what seems at first glance as a methodological impasse in Simmel, should be in fact placed within a wider and more pragmatic and teleological perspective, reflects Simmel's restrained optimism and quest for knowledge.

Chapter 4 : Simmel and Bergson : Vitalism Revisited

I. Introduction

Que Bergson soit tellement plus important que moi, je ne puis que m'en réjouir ; mais que je sois tellement moins important que lui, c'est tout simplement insupportable.

Georg Simmel

Simmel est toujours très intéressant dans les détails

Henri Bergson

In almost every text which deals with the strictly philosophical or metaphysical side of Simmel's thought, there exists a reference to the French philosopher Henri Bergson. The emphasis on the affinities in the works of the two philosophers is exclusively focused on the philosophical doctrine of vitalism, which indeed permeates their thought, albeit in a radically different manner. The doctrine of vitalism or life-philosophy, as it is otherwise known, can be traced back to Greek philosophy. The thought of Heraclitus abounds in ideas on the cosmic movement of life and its flux, and the considerable influence which he exerted on Nietzsche, resulted into the introduction of vitalism to German thought. Its application to the *Geisteswissenschaften* can be attributed to Dilthey and Simmel, while Spengler introduced it in a most radical way to historiography. The case of Bergson is perhaps the most ambivalent one, since on the one hand he is regarded as the major exponent of vitalism while on the other, his world-view is significantly antithetical to those endorsed by his German predecessors.

I make an attempt in this chapter to highlight the fundamental similarities and differences between Simmel and Bergson, in a way which does not aim at ratifying previous interpretations, but departs from them quite substantially. Thus, the reader should not be surprised to find that the affiliation between the world-views of the two thinkers is more far apart than previously assumed. Indeed, the existing literature on either Simmel or Bergson is characterized by a paradox : although it emphasizes in a most confident manner the close relationship between the two thinkers, it does not provide an analysis, substantive and detailed enough, which would testify as to the validity of this claim.¹⁴⁰ The parameters of the comparison therefore will be the following : a) the

¹⁴⁰ Rudolph Weingartner (1960), Alfred Mamelet (1914), Raymond Aron (1950), David Frisby (1981),

attitudes of both thinkers to prevalent issues in the contemporary philosophical and sociological discourse, such as relativism, vitalism, methodology of the social sciences, morality, and religion ; b) the critical evaluation of their systems of thought and the actual extent to which Simmelian and Bergsonian philosophies converge. It is far from my purpose here, to adumbrate a hagiographic portrait of Simmel in relation to Bergson, despite the fact that the reader might occasionally encounter sympathetic attitudes towards the work of the German philosopher. I feel I should stress the problems inherent in such a comparison and hope that I will not cause confusion through my evaluative remarks for I am inclined to believe that Simmel's *Weltanschauung* is more complete than Bergson's. However, apart from delineating the strengths and weaknesses in their thought, I am going to provide ground for vitalism's relevance to sociology and philosophy, despite the fact that Bergson has been given a marginal position in contemporary academic philosophy and social science.

Following this introduction, the second part of the chapter is devoted to an informative exposition of Bergson's key ideas. This will be essential in trying to present as clearly and succinctly as possible, the arguments which form the structure of Bergson's philosophy, avoiding at this stage any appraisals of its main premises. Thus, I will be dealing with the issues of Time and the artificial structure of "past - present - future", with the problem of duration (*durée*) and memory, as well as with the dialectic between instinct and intelligence. An expansion then, to the problems of science and metaphysics will be attempted, culminating in Bergson's idea of the vital impetus (*élan vital*). The exclusively comparative section will be introduced through part III of the present chapter, where I will be contrasting both thinkers' attitudes towards relativism, focusing of course on Bergson's version since I have already discussed Simmel's relativism in our previous chapters. In part IV the discussion will be geared towards Life-Philosophy (*Lebensphilosophie*), where I will be discussing the philosophical system of vitalism given through the angle of these two idiosyncratic philosophers. The discussion will thus be centered towards exemplary aspects of their work, such as Simmel's essay on "The Conflict in Modern Culture", chapter 1 of his *Lebensanschauung : Vier Metaphysische Kapitel*, titled "The Transcendent Character of Life", and Bergson's *Creative Evolution*. A slight deviation from this pattern, which is relevant to both vitalism and relativism, will be attempted in Part V, where I will refer to Bergson's only sociological work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, in relation to Simmel's *Sociology of Religion*. This will be then, the last part of my comparative analysis, only to be followed by the concluding remarks.

Francois Léger (1989), Vladimir Jankélévitch (1988), Georg Lukács (1980, 1990), Thomas Vanatta (1948), Pierre Trotignon (1968).

In an essay on Bergson, Simmel has given a lucid exposition of the novelties the French thinker has introduced in philosophical thought. However, he also points to the one-dimensional and partially problematic aspects of Bergson's philosophy, aspects which I exploit here and I develop into a more detailed analysis. Simmel uses Bergson in order to sustain his own philosophical vitalism by pointing to the affiliation between time and life. By declaring that the "very sense of living is ageing"¹⁴¹ Simmel not only places life on a biological plane but also proceeds at negating a mechanistic process of living.¹⁴² He also points to life's unique capacity of generating itself and to the dualistic movement towards vitality and exhaustion of vitality.

I turn now to the discussion of the philosophical system of Henri Bergson, examining the sources, characteristics and repercussions, which turned it into such an influential doctrine at the beginning of this century.

II. The fundamental aspects of Bergson's thought

The evolution of Bergson's thought, and actually of the whole movement of vitalism, goes back to Heraclitus, in a perhaps more explicit manner than usually assumed. The latter's anti-scientific attitude and scorn for people like Pythagoras, stemmed from his general idea of the world, not as an organic functional whole, but as a movement, a cosmic process which permanently undergoes unforeseeable change. This dynamic view of the cosmos is captured in what is perhaps Heraclitus' most famous phrase : "Everything is in flux and nothing is at rest".¹⁴³ His profound influence on Nietzsche, in both ideas of "life" and "war", was catalytic in shaping the vitalistic - irrational movement in Germany and France at the turn of the century. I will come back to Heraclitus in due course, examining his influence on Simmel, for there are some astonishing similarities between the Greek philosopher and the German sociologist. For the moment I turn to Bergson.

The esteem and eminence which the natural sciences enjoyed at the end of 19th century, can be overtly detected in the thought of the philosophers and social scientists of that period. Bergson is perhaps the most characteristic example. The influence of biological and in general evolutionary theories is apparent, although Bergson likes to

¹⁴¹ Simmel (1922 : 129)

¹⁴² Ibid.: 130

¹⁴³ Quoted in Karl Popper, (1962 : 12).

dissociate himself with the main premises of this body of knowledge.¹⁴⁴ The biological theories of Darwin and Lamarck, and the sociology of Spencer occupy though, in one form or another, a dominant position in his philosophy. Despite the fact that Bergson points acutely to their shortcomings, it is easy to detect their residues in some of his main formulations. For example, the neo-Lamarckian theory plays a crucial role in Bergson's fundamental idea of the creation of the optical organs in animals. The attraction which Bergson found in the theory of Lamarck was that unlike the Darwinian theory of evolution, it provided a strong psychological element in the evolutionary process. Bergson draws largely on this theory when he contends that :

The variation that results in a new species is not, they believe, merely an accidental variation inherent in the germ itself, nor is it governed by a determinism *sui generis* which develops definite characters in a definite direction, apart from every consideration of utility. **It springs from the very effort of the living being to adapt itself to the circumstances of its existence.** ([italics in the original, emphasis added] Bergson 1911a: 81)

The manifest rejection of determinism in evolution, culminates with Bergson's assumption that animals developed sight because of their will to see. A somewhat nebulous and vague desire to adapt to the environment, which is though psychological and resorts to an active impulse, has resulted according to Bergson in the creation of organs of sight. This effort, which resembles the act of free will, is what Bergson calls "creative evolution", or even "life". This "spontaneity of life is manifested by a continual creation of new forms succeeding others".¹⁴⁵ A vital impetus guides every effort, every act of living organisms, as if it pushes from behind the totality of the living beings, in higher forms of evolution. That this is a collective force and not just an act of the isolated individual organism, Bergson clearly accepts, since the individual will, would have been capable of creative action only in a very limited number of cases.¹⁴⁶ So, whereas Heraclitus saw Fire as the primordial force guiding the world, Bergson ascribes to Life and the vital impetus (*élan vital*) the privilege of creation of all living beings since the genesis of the cosmos. This vital movement, unpredictable as it is, mobilises action in its struggle to overcome the resistance of matter. It is a process which defies any teleology, since a definite goal would imply prior knowledge of the process of attainment.

Accordingly, no one could foresee that at a certain stage life would create the most

¹⁴⁴ Bergson deals with Darwin rather briefly, albeit critically in *Creative Evolution*. There, one also finds a discussion on Lamarckism, as well as a whole section critical of Spencer's evolutionism.

¹⁴⁵ Bergson,(1911a : 91).

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. : 92.

radical differentiation in the structure of living beings. Bergson argues that from a certain stage onwards in animal life, there appeared two separate paths : instinct and intelligence. These, Bergson holds to be both complementary and opposite to each other.¹⁴⁷ He asserts that "instinct and intelligence [...] represent two divergent solutions, equally fitting, of one and the same problem".¹⁴⁸ The problem, as I understand it, is to grasp the Absolute. Now, the Absolute for Bergson is what is fluid, the vital movement behind action. Bergson initially accepts the functional significance of both faculties. He says :

In short, while instinct and intelligence both involve knowledge, this knowledge is rather *acted* and unconscious in the case of instinct, *thought* and conscious in the case of intelligence. But it is a difference of degree rather than of kind. ([italics in the original] Bergson 1911a: 153)

But isn't this difference of degree, a pure relativization of the status of the two faculties ? This wouldn't have been problematic for Bergson as long as he was clear as to whether both faculties have access to the Absolute. For it seems that although he ascribes to them a harmonious and reciprocal existence and aim, he actually deprives intelligence of any real potential, rendering it eventually inferior to instinct. The former attitude is expressed in the following quotation :

There are things that intelligence alone is able to seek, but which, by itself, it will never find. These things instinct alone could find; but it will never seek them. (Bergson 1911a:159)

All this, is indeed very appealing and sensible (i.e. the functional unity of instinct and intelligence). But this apparent symmetry in their function and eventual course, is disturbed by Bergson's other attitude which wants intelligence subordinate to instinct. He suggests that although the two are never really separable - yet somehow they diverge more and more as they develop - it is intelligence that "has even more need of instinct than instinct has of intelligence [...]"¹⁴⁹ This is perhaps a fatal lacuna in Bergson's formulation, for it undermines the utility of the faculty of intelligence. We wouldn't have

¹⁴⁷ Parenthetically here, I feel I ought to mention that while Bergson repudiates relativism, - in a very acute manner, one should admit - he nevertheless makes extensive use of relativistic assumptions in order to support and formulate his argument. This is mostly the case with his distinction between instinct and intelligence, although in defence of Bergson one could say that relativistic postulates are just a heuristic principle which eventually leads to a refutation and negation of relativism. This can be asserted only partially, since some of Bergson's most fundamental conclusions are nothing more than echoes of the most extreme form of relativism. For an example see the rest of our discussion on his notions of instinct and intelligence as well as the comparative section on relativism.

¹⁴⁸ Bergson, (1911a : 150).

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.: 149-150.

objected to this argument had Bergson been bolder in formulating his thought. This should have been the case, simply because the whole of Bergson's intellectual edifice, is based on the primary importance of instinct against the debasement of intelligence. And Bergson's chief argument for this assertion, is that the point is to grasp life in its raw state, or rather in its indivisible movement, something which is achieved only through intuition, which is a sort of superior instinct. What seems to be the case though, according to Bergson, is that, intelligence in its attempt to comprehend life, breaks down reality in an arbitrary - and therefore relative - process. This happens because action is seen as the relativization of the human intellect, since the latter corresponds to the needs posited by utility.

Bergson's philosophy has been regarded as being intuitive. This is certainly not far from truth since the concept of intuition permeates Bergsonism. The aim of intuition is to discover the "inwardness of life", in other words the Absolute which Bergson equates with life's movement. For him, intuition is "instinct that has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely".¹⁵⁰

From this point onwards, Bergson's philosophy is guided by the fluctuation between positive and negative, or in other words between instinct / intuition and intelligence. His dissatisfaction with the faculty of intelligence is reflected on his general aversion of science as the unique source of knowledge, since the world of science has been constructed by intelligence, which consequently, gives only an imitation of reality but not reality itself. The distinction between intuition and intelligence is further reinforced by the flux, the movement of becoming. Bergson equates upward movement, that is life's impetus, with intuition, while downward movement which is understood by intelligence leads to matter. The reader may recall that matter has a pejorative connotation in the Bergsonian system, since it is matter's boundaries that life seeks to overcome.

Similarly, when he discusses the ideas of time and space, Bergson does so, along the parameters of instinct and intelligence. "Life", he says, "presents itself to us as evolution in time and complexity in space".¹⁵¹ But complexity is a vice according to Bergson, since it is the work of mechanical explanation, and operates exclusively on the static and not on the dynamic. It is evolution that we should be interested in, since evolution is creative and above all "living". The point is, that one should be dealing with processes which are fluid and alive not with things which might be complex, but are ultimately shadows, dead representations of life. The following excerpt from *Time and Free Will*, summarizes this attitude :

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*: 186

¹⁵¹ Bergson, (1911b : 89)

To sum up ; every demand for explanation in regard to freedom comes back, without one suspecting it, to the following question : "Can time be adequately represented in space?". To which we answer : Yes, if you are dealing with time flown ; No, if you speak of time flowing. Now, the free act takes place in time which is flowing and not in time which has already flown. (Bergson 1910: 221)

The problem according to Bergson, as I understand it, is that we operate in a state of reified objects, of analytical and highly complex ideas which become more and more far apart. For to objectify or reify what is in constant motion, is to ascribe to the dynamic the static, to render the moving at rest. To abstract anything out of the living process, is to break up the interrelatedness of all things in the cosmic process of life. This abstraction leads eventually to loss of meaning, to loss of life itself. By arranging objects in space, man not only impoverishes life, but he ultimately alters its nature since he mistakes the process for the thing. Eventually Bergson is led to assert that it is a misfortune that :

[...] our life unfolds in space rather than in time ; we live for the external world rather than for ourselves ; we speak rather than think ; we "are acted" rather than act ourselves. To act freely is to recover possession of oneself, and to get back into pure duration. (Bergson 1910: 231-232)

Pure duration is the actual state of being - within - life. It is only in duration where all the elements of the cosmos exist in their interrelatedness. Bergson replaces the Spinozian *sub specie aeternitatis* with the perception of things *sub specie durationis*, which would allow us access to the life-process. Only through pure duration can we place ourselves into the eternity, an eternity which is not immutable, but moving and wholly unpredictable.¹⁵² Now, duration exists in memory. It is through memory that one can grasp the continuity of events, and place himself in the flux of life. For it is Bergson's assumption that, past, present and future are really indivisible. The present is an artificial construction which contains, arbitrarily chosen, portions of the past and the future. Bergson even asserts that every perception is already memory. His idea of memory is a rather complex one and I am not prepared at this stage to dissect it into clearly stated analytical postulates, for it does not comprise the skeleton of my comparison with Simmel. However, since it forms an inextricable part of Bergson's thought, I feel I should at least expose its function in his system, albeit in a very crude manner. In memory a new functional ramification appears : motor mechanism and independent

¹⁵² Bergson, (1946 : 186)

recollection. The first refers to mechanical or perhaps better, habitual recollections while the second deals with recollections which go back to a specific event in time. It is in memory where duration resides, and since duration means indivisible continuity, one is led to deduce that every single aspect of one's life is contained in his memory, and in specific circumstances can reach the threshold of consciousness.¹⁵³ The consequences of this assertion are evident in the idea of the dead past which Bergson openly repudiates. For if past events, in the conventional meaning of the word, are registered in their minutest details in memory, then one does not deal with a "dead" past, but a past which lives in the present :

Inner duration is the continuous life of a memory which prolongs the past into the present either containing within it in a distinct form the ceaselessly growing image of the past, or, more probably, showing by its continual change of quality the heavier and still heavier load we drag behind us as we grow older. Without this survival of the past into the present there would be no duration, but only instantaneity. (Bergson 1913: 38)

Pure duration seems actually to be the verification for the accumulated force in the vital impetus, the enormous push of life. For if the past is alive in the present, then all the elements intrinsic in our own lives achieve a functional unity, which might not be apparent in consciousness, or impossible to perceive through intelligence, but which nevertheless expands indefinitely and unpredictably towards higher forms.

These assumptions are also found in what I regard as Bergson's most sociological and paradoxically most neglected work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, where one observes the application of Bergsonism on issues of high anthropological and sociological interest. Since I will be discussing the relevance of this work for sociology in our comparative section on religion, there is no reason to embark here on further analysis. Suffice it to say only, that the contrast between instinct and intelligence, finds its palpable expression in the antithesis between mysticism and religion.

The influence of Bergson's philosophy is an open question. Some trace it in Bergsonism's affiliation to William James' pragmatism. Others, emphasize its fundamental importance in the development of vitalism, but despite Bergson numerous heirs in literature and the arts,¹⁵⁴ his thoughts was never integrated into a credible

¹⁵³ The sudden confrontation with death, consists for Bergson the proof for his assertion. He maintains that in cases of resuscitation (people being hanged or drowned), when "[the man is] brought to life again, states that he saw, in a very short time, all the forgotten events of his life passing before him with great rapidity, with the smallest circumstances and in the very order in which they occurred". (Bergson, 1991 : 155).

¹⁵⁴ Having said that, it seems that Bergson exerted considerable influence in the realm of literature and art, rather than in the one of philosophy or social science. In painting the Bergsonian *durée* and *élan vital*,

philosophical system since. Vitalism as a current movement in philosophy is non-existent, while in sociology it is indirectly - and most of the times, pejoratively - related to Nietzsche. In Simmel, unsurprisingly enough, the vitalistic and relativistic sides of his thought, were the ones plunged into oblivion.

Criticisms of Bergson's system and of its consequences, can be found in various eminent thinkers¹⁵⁵, but they were mainly advanced by rationalists such as Bertrand Russell.¹⁵⁶ He suggests that Bergson's system deprives man of action, rendering him a powerless organon of instinct and passion. Russell draws heavily on Bergson's relativization of all philosophical systems as equally inadequate for total comprehension of the world. On these grounds, he attacks Bergson as an agent of irrationalism and implicitly, as an exponent of fascism (one may wonder whether it is purely coincidental that Lukács based his criticisms on more or less the same grounds, accusing the whole vitalistic movement as the cause for the rise of Nazism in Germany!).

To what extent these criticisms do justice to Bergson I shall examine towards the last sections of the chapter where an overall evaluation of Bergson's thought will be attempted. I should add here that we have deliberately excluded from this general exposition of Bergson's work, crucial ideas which relate to his attitude towards relativism, science, metaphysics, and society, for purely methodological reasons, since these concepts clarify better the foci of the following discussion, and allow a more transparent view of their affinities with Simmel. Thus, what follows, is the attempt to demonstrate that vitalism for sociology, is of more use and substance than a mere poeticism !

III. Relativism as a point of divergence between Bergson and Simmel

The epistemological doctrine of relativism recurs often in Bergson's work, albeit in a rather uncomplementary fashion. In all of his books there are scattered references to

influenced some Expressionists, but they mainly inspired to a large extent the Cubists and the Futurists. Strong Bergsonian residues can also be found in George Bernard Shaw's *Back to Methuselah*, Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, and in the works of Marcel Proust, Nicos Kazantzakis and Hermann Hesse. The latter, in a very acute manner, summarizes Bergson's orientation : "He forgoes all claim to the provability and universal validity of logicoscientific work, not because he does not understand it and has not mastered it, but because his strongly artistically inclined nature urges him along the path of intuition, of empathy, and of supralogical, prophetic perception." (Hesse, 1989 : 368)

¹⁵⁵ George Herbert Mead in his *The Philosophy of the Present* refers briefly but critically on Bergson's idea of "present" and "memory". In historiography, criticisms are found in R.G. Collingwood's *The Idea of History*, while Georg Lukács holds him responsible for the catastrophic cultivation and evolution of irrationalism in his *The Destruction of Reason*.

¹⁵⁶ See Russell's *History of Western Philosophy and Power*.

this doctrine, which are not particularly helpful if one wishes to present Bergson's thought in the context of relativism. However, his essay titled *An Introduction to Metaphysics* , deals almost exclusively with relativism, and it is worth looking at its major premises.

Bergson's assumptions on relativism are indeed very ambivalent, and have caused problems in classifying him as an advocate or enemy of relativism. What might be particularly useful here - in order to avoid similar confusion - , is to retain the fundamental distinction between intuition / instinct and intelligence. For it is this qualitative bifurcation of life which Bergson sees as the true cause for relativism.

Knowledge is possible, for Bergson only in two ways, both of which are determined by our position to the object-to-be-known :

The first depends on the point of view at which we are placed and on the symbols by which we express ourselves. The second neither depends on a point of view nor relies on any symbol. The first kind of knowledge may be said to stop at the relative ; the second, in those cases where it is possible, to attain the absolute. (Bergson 1913: 1)

One should not be hesitant here in labelling the first, intelligence and the second, instinct. Therefore, if abstraction means selection and subsequent symbolic representation of some material, from the life - process, then Bergson is tempted to assert, that we can only move within the relative. It is thus evident, that this selection is done on a purely arbitrary basis, and consequently results into contrasting, or at best, intersecting perspectives which only represent a fragmented version of reality. The reader might recall at this early stage, our discussion of Simmel's view of the historical process and the task of the interpreter which can yield nothing but subjectively oriented accounts of history. However, when Bergson maintains that "coincidence with the person himself would alone give me the absolute", one suspects that the only possible means of achieving this, is by empathy or intuition. Yet, this point although at first glance seems inconsistent with Simmel's sociology of knowledge, if looked at more carefully it reveals profound similarities. Simmel characteristically, holds that :

It is entirely legitimate that the theoretical conception we have of a particular individual should vary with the standpoint from which it is formed, a standpoint which is the result of the overall relation between knower and known. One can never know another person *absolutely* , which would involve knowledge of every single thought and mood. Nevertheless, one forms some personal unity out of those of his fragments in which alone he is accessible to us. ([italics, in the original] Simmel 1950: 308)

Fundamentally, this attitude is almost identical to Bergson's. For even when Simmel claims that absolute knowledge of each other is impossible, he does so just because his attitude is more pragmatic and ultimately more pessimistic than Bergson's. Simmel accepts that knowledge has inevitably a fragmentary and incomplete character since the totality of things (whereas actually Bergson means life), cannot be absorbed by the individual. In fact it is Bergson's aversion to intelligence, enhanced by his optimistic attitude, which cause him to reject not only the relativistic form of knowing, but even to prevent him acknowledging its inescapable character. They both assert though, that the current essence of knowledge is relativistic. The difference lies on the fact that Bergson seeks to surpass it, while Simmel takes it for granted. Both thinkers would however agree that what we are asked to construe is only a representation, a phantasm of reality.

The dialectic between instinct and intelligence, acquires another manifestation which Bergson does not express directly, but it is not difficult to infer : that of metaphysics and science. The paradox of instinct and intelligence, whereby one depends on the other for the attainment of the absolute, but yet instinct being ascribed a superior function, is analogical of the existence of science and metaphysics. Although Bergson places science subordinate to metaphysics since the latter is the means which defies symbolic representation¹⁵⁷ he proceeds in apparent contradiction, in his subsequent reconciliation of the two epistemological realms, by claiming that only a

[...] true intuitive philosophy would realize the much-desired union of science and metaphysics. While it could make of metaphysics a positive science - that is a progressive and indefinitely perfectible one - it would at the same time lead the positive sciences [...] to become conscious of their true scope, often far greater than they imagine. It would put more science into metaphysics, and more metaphysics into science. (Bergson 1913: 63)

Bergson's aversion to "form" and his reverence for "content", manifest itself in his critical stand towards symbolic representation and concept application. Attacking empiricism and rationalism on the issue of the arbitrary abstraction of the contents of the life-process¹⁵⁸, Bergson places the individual into the empty world of forms, where one deals not "with

¹⁵⁷ Bergson, (1913 : 8)

¹⁵⁸ In his attack Bergson, as I interpret him, includes also the solipsism of Fichte. He says : "Is it astonishing that the philosophers who have isolated this "form" of personality should, then, find it insufficient to characterize a definite person, and that they should be gradually led to make their empty ego a kind of bottomless receptacle, which belongs no more to Peter than to Paul, and in which there is room, according to our preference, for entire humanity, for God, or for existence in general?" (Bergson, 1913 : 30). This destructive relativization of the content is indeed detectable in Gottlieb Fichte's philosophy of the Ego. For similar criticisms, see B.Russell's *Power* .

fragments of a thing", but "with fragments of its symbol".¹⁵⁹ The problematic nature of our knowledge as Bergson understands it, lies on the fact that utility governs any pursuit for comprehension of the world. It therefore gives rise to interpretations, valid for the particular perspective they were drawn from, but ultimately debased into subjective and inadequate exegeses, when "applied to the totality of things".¹⁶⁰ Again, it is the moral judgement which Bergson imposes on concepts like utility, intelligence or even sociability, which renders his approach to relativism incongruent to the one advocated by Simmel. It seems that the major deficiency in Bergson's system stems from two factors : a) its lack of inbuilt protection which would guarantee safety against the very same attacks which Bergsonism launches towards other world-views, and b) its superficial interpretation of society, which Bergson identifies with the evil of intelligence. In both cases, Bergson's philosophy proves to be inferior to Simmel's, and much more vulnerable to criticism. The self-defeat of his scheme starts from the usual argument which non-relativists employ against relativism. He maintains :

The demonstrations which have been given of the relativity of our knowledge are [...] tainted with an original vice ; they imply, like the dogmatism they attack, that all knowledge must necessarily start from concepts with fixed outlines, in order to clasp with them the reality which flows. (Bergson 1913: 58)

But Bergson here misapprehends two things : a) that the relativist actually negates the existence of fixed concepts and postulates , and b) that **reality is relative precisely because it flows**. This second objection I have to Bergson's argument I shall discuss in the next section on vitalism because it is closely linked with Simmel's version of *lebensphilosophie*. Additionally Bergson, on these relativistic grounds attacks established world-views in philosophy¹⁶¹ as equally deficient, excluding of course his own. Bergson unfortunately when he talks about relativism, he talks about the conventional view which equates this doctrine with a sort of subjectivistic lunacy, and with a corrosion of truth. The demolition of Bergson's own system, - if one takes seriously these non-relativistic arguments - is apparent since he fails to ascribe to it the absolute validity which he constantly sought. What Bergson fails to see, Simmel had already made excellent use of, in avoiding similar pitfalls :

¹⁵⁹ Bergson (1913 : 25)

¹⁶⁰ Bergson (1946 : 55-56)

¹⁶¹ The Substance of Spinoza, the Ego of Fichte, the Absolute of Schelling, the Idea of Hegel, the Will of Schopenhauer are all placed on the same par as "empty" explanations of the totality of things. Add to this list Bergson's own *Élan Vital* as equally arbitrary and subjectivistic, and you get Bergsonism substantially "devitalized". See Bergson, (1946 : 55-56)

The relativistic view has often been considered as a degradation of the value and significance of things, regardless of the fact that only a naive adherence to something absolute, which is here questioned, could put relativism in such a position. (Simmel 1978: 118)

The attitude Bergson has towards relativism draws heavily on the detrimental functions of intelligence in turning away man from pure duration, therefore from any possibility of attaining the absolute. So, whereas Simmel sees the absolute inextricably linked with the relative, and in a reciprocal relation to each other, Bergson reifies life, arbitrarily elevating it onto the status of an absolute, which apparently has no relation at all with the relative. The relative for Bergson, is no more than the ossification of life, no more than a blurred version of reality. Bergson's mistake, as I see it, is to equate the dynamic with the absolute, and the static with the relative, assuming strangely enough, that there can be a mode of existence operating in pure autonomy ; and that one, would be for Bergson the dynamic. By denying the so-called static reality (relative), any real potential for representation of the dynamic reality (absolute), he ultimately condemns the social existence of man, since it is based on conceptual signification and symbolic representation, to falsehood and delusion. Of course, again, Bergson forgets that his theory itself is a product of such a fictitious (social) existence. The way Bergson formulates his view is ostensibly Aristotelian due to the fact that Bergson envisages a radical change where man would move from intelligence to intuition in order to get to pure duration, to life. However his whole intellectual disposition seems to be in its form, Platonic. For Bergson asserts that, in the beginning of life, instinct and intelligence used to be identical, or rather to coexist harmoniously.¹⁶² When they became separate, through life's mysterious bifurcations, instinct retained its privileged place, while intelligence paradoxically was reduced to a faculty of ephemeral, and therefore relative functions. Although Bergson attacks Plato through an attack on Kant, he unwittingly perhaps, resorts to Platonic thinking himself. This is so because : a) Bergson aims at uniting instinct and intelligence, therefore restoring the continuity of life, and b) because he ascribes to instinct and intelligence an *a priori* status, by rendering them as the only possible categories of man's understanding of the cosmos, or more generally, of man's state of being-within-life. The analogy with man's fall from the Ideas is, I feel, apparent.

It is though in Bergson's references to the social character of human life where one detects the failure of his scheme. Again, the unbalanced relationship between instinct and

¹⁶² "[...] let us simply say that intelligence and instinct are forms of consciousness which must have interpenetrated each other in their rudimentary state and become dissociated as they grew." (Bergson, 1935 : 17)

intelligence, passion and reason, manifests itself clearly in extracts like the following :

Man must live in society, and consequently submit to rules. And what interest advises, reason commands : duty calls, and we have to obey the summons. Under this dual influence has perforce been formed an outward layer of feelings and ideas which make for permanence, aim at becoming common to all men, and cover, when they are not strong enough to extinguish it, the inner fire of individual passions. (Bergson 1911b: 158-159)

That society imposes rules and modes of behavior which might be contradictory to the human nature, few would deny. On the other hand though, who can conceive a society or a relation between individuals, which would not be subjected to reciprocally accepted and codified modes of behavior ? Or is it possible to imagine a society where human action would not be governed by some sort of action beneficial for its conductor, in other words a society where the utilitarian element would have been non-existent ? Bergson is wrong when asserting that the utilitarian element of human action is necessarily the work of intelligence. For experience suggests that there are cases where the individual as part of the social whole, is led to beneficial action by means of instinctual behaviour or intuition. When a man is asked to choose between action plan A, which reason commands to be the safest through rational verification of previous experience, over action plan B which reason labels as detrimental for the specific acting agent, and the agent chooses the latter despite the fact that his action clashes with rational planning, he does so because instinct or intuition have dictated, or in a sense anticipated that action plan B can lead at this specific instance, to beneficial results. Society, it is our contention, cannot exist at all if based solely on rational organization as it cannot be conceived at all if man is guided purely by instinct, or by the "inner fire of individual passions". In the first case all action would have been foreseeable, and in the second case action would have been self-destructive. Both cases are equally absurd and equally impossible.

Bergson's polemical treatment of the dialectic between society and the individual moves away from any synthetic reconciliation since society, relativity, matter, space and intelligence are treated pejoratively. The extreme individualism of Bergson culminates in the identical character of society and relativity :

Spatiality therefore, and in this quite special sense, **sociability, are in this case the real causes of the relativity of our knowledge.** Brushing aside this veil, we get back to the immediate and reach an absolute. ([Emphasis added] Bergson 1946: 29)

The inability of Bergson to provide a practical application or version of his theory where the individual, outside his social existence, would grasp life, seems to us to point at the

main problems in his philosophy. Bergson's antipathy for the logico-scientific world is corroborated by his belief that intelligence has become the governing force behind all social activity. The concomitant implication of this, is that Bergson ascribes now to the social element in human life, the degrading function responsible for man's alienation from himself. Again, he resorts to Platonism, since he contemplates man's return to the ideal state, where the individual and the social elements were united in one. ¹⁶³

This emphasis on the individual, leads Bergson to embrace a sort of psychologism as the true approach to the explanation of social phenomena. In a pre-Freudian manner he rejects a mode of social explanation lying exclusively in modes of interaction or communication, excluding thus, the primordial individual qualities :

[...] in the first place, for society to exist at all the individual must bring into it a whole group of inborn tendencies ; society therefore is not self-explanatory ; so we must search below the social accretions, get down to Life, of which human societies, as indeed the human species altogether, are but manifestations. (Bergson 1935: 82)

Bergson, however, fails to clarify how this would be possible. His aversion towards methodologies leaves him in the sphere of metaphysics and of pure hypothetical speculation. Simmel, on the other hand, although pre-Freudian in much of his approach to social phenomena, escaped Bergson's reductionism and eventually formulated a philosophical sociology, grounded on both relativism and vitalism, which does not exclude constructive exegesis of the social world.

To recapitulate : the fundamental difference between the two thinkers is their attitude towards relativism. Bergson sees it, as we have demonstrated, as a distorting view of reality and he clearly ascribes to it a negative connotation. He does not deny though that relativism permeates human societies, and that it should be seen as a quality which inheres in the faculty of intelligence. The fact that intelligence, which unfortunately Bergson equates with the realms of logic, mathematics and science, has been given a dominant position in man's attitude towards the world. The problem resides in the function of intelligence which "is characterized by the unlimited power of decomposing according to any law and of recomposing into any system".¹⁶⁴ Thus, the *modus operandi* of human understanding can only work with things or relations. And to a more general extent, as he argues, typification and classification are no more than the practical recognition of particular traits according to the human need. This utilitarian element in human action, gives rise to different perspectives, rendering man a captive of relativism.

¹⁶³ Bergson, (1935 : 26)

¹⁶⁴ Bergson, (1911a : 165)

Bergson accepts on the other hand, a psychological, moving absolute which he equates with Life ; the means by which man can be placed in its duration, is intuition.

In Simmel, as we have already seen, the starting point is different. Although his polymorphic relativism reveals affinities with Bergson's ¹⁶⁵, it is actually profoundly different. For in Simmel's philosophy, relativism is not synonymous to the negation of truth, but rather the opposite. Relativism (or better, relationism) has a positive character, since it exists only in relation to its own opposite - absolutism -, and since its interrelatedness brings it closer to the One or the All.¹⁶⁶ Consequently, while Bergson undermines the positive role of sociability and space for human life, Simmel considers both as indispensable elements of understanding social life. Simmel's extensive work on social space and sociability confirm his radical departure from Bergson's purely intuitive system.

The exclusive focus on relativism in this section might indeed obscure the actual relation between Bergson and Simmel. However, the affinities in their philosophies will be apparent in the next section on vitalism, which I feel will clarify certain points as to where relativism stands within vitalistic philosophy.

IV. Vitalism as a point of convergence between Bergson and Simmel

Before I embark on the scrutiny of *lebensphilosophie* within the parameters of Bergson's and Simmel's thought, a brief presentation of the historical evolution of vitalism is desirable. This will serve the purpose of placing both thinkers within the appropriate cultural context, and at the same time of demonstrating the influence of

¹⁶⁵ For example, Simmel's view of history as a science and of the historian's ability to reconstruct the past, has something of Bergson's utilitarian perspective immanent in man. The inability of the researcher to grasp the totality of historical events, leads according to Simmel to the creation of many histories due to the relativity of our perceptions.

¹⁶⁶ "All particular continuities and substantialities, all second-order absolutes, are so completely merged in that single absolute that one might say : all the contents of the world view have become relativities in a monism such as Spinoza's." (Simmel, 1978 : 118) It is precisely at this point where one can see why Simmel's version of an absolute is more coherent than Bergson's. The latter, by negating the relative character of human existence, elevated *élan vital* to the place of an absolute, without explaining its relationship to the mundane, pragmatic reality governed by intelligence. By negating the interrelatedness of things, Bergson stripped his absolute of any reality, dogmatically placing it above any other material or idea. Simmel by dissolving the absolute into a relation has on the contrary, been able to place every facet of the world into a concrete unity. Thus, while Bergson seeks to transcend finite existence through the vital impetus, Simmel proceeds for the same goal through the ideas of the reciprocal relation between all the elements of the cosmos and transcendence.

vitalism on some sociological theories. Following this sub-section, I will discuss in some detail certain facets of Bergson's notion of Life, moving to his influence on Simmel's "transcendence of life", the latter's application of life-philosophy to culture, culminating with a short discussion of vitalism in relation to death. The above structure, I hope will provide a clear analytical and explanatory model the basis of which is the attempt to demonstrate that philosophy and sociology intersect.

a) The philosophical genesis of vitalism :

I have already established that the inspiration for vitalism, in a very rudimentary form, lies within the philosophy of Heraclitus. Moving to contemporary philosophy it seems necessary to mention Goethe. His thought is perhaps the one which encompasses all the ideas which much later manifested themselves as vitalistic postulates. The glorification of Nature is, for a start, the factor which has contributed to the nostalgic character of all German thought, both philosophical and social. One may recall Ferdinand Tönnies' distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, and the lack of sympathy of the author towards the second type of social organization. In Weber, but more palpably in Simmel, one sees an acute description of modern society usually in a critical manner. Indeed, the whole critique of modernity seems to have been generated by Goethe via Nietzsche. In Goethe, one also sees the concept of myth taking up a leading place in the explanation, or rather the non-explanation¹⁶⁷ of the universe, a notion which exerted catalytic influence in the agnostic-irrationalist movement in Germany (Spengler). Additionally, it was in Goethe, where relativism was skillfully veiled through an all-pervasive individualism. The elimination of epistemological boundaries in Goethe, whereby the universe is contained within the individual, as well as the manifold manifestation of the Spirit in forms, find in Simmel's thought their climactic expression. In other words, Simmel when analyzing Goethe, espouses the negation of any "rigid separateness" between the contents of the world, where unity and multiplicity, individual and society, relativism and monism, become One.¹⁶⁸ This cosmic unity is epitomized by the oneness of formal categories of life such as the artistic, the pantheistic, or the individual, which become indivisible under the thread of Life. The deification of Life is

¹⁶⁷ "Goddesses reign in majestic isolation

About them no place, nor less a time ;

To speak of them is most difficult.

Faust : Where is the path ?

There is no path ! Where no one has trod,

One must not tread."

Goethe, *Faust*, part 2, act 1, "Dark Gallery", quoted in Dilthey (1988).

¹⁶⁸ Simmel, ([1912] 1990b : 94)

better captured under a phrase from Goethe : "The goal of life, is life itself".¹⁶⁹

Most of these ideas found in Goethe, acquire a more radical form with Nietzsche. He is regarded by many (e.g. Georg Lukács) as the father of modern irrationalism. In Nietzsche, the idea of eternal recurrence is inextricably linked with Life. Leaving aside for a moment the questions of relativism or objectivity, I should cite a characteristic excerpt from Simmel's interpretation of Nietzsche, which integrates the thought of Nietzsche, Simmel and Bergson :

The infinite repetition of a being that is limited by finitude, and the causality through which phenomena that surge up and then disappear like waves in a continuous river win a durability and an eternity of being - which was stolen from them by their temporal destiny - make the eternal recurrence into a synthesis or, as Nietzsche would say, into an "approximation" between being and becoming. This approximation is expressed in an ambiguous relation among concepts: **they transform the finitude of becoming into the infinity of being, or the finitude of being into an infinity of becoming.** [...] Nietzsche replaces a final goal with an evolutionary process that contains diverse goals and values : instead of one absolute level that is intended by the cosmic process, **any level that supersedes the actual one gains significance.** But the evolutionary process still contains the disquiet of boundlessness and fosters an insecurity based on the impossibility of an overview of the whole. ([emphasis added] Simmel 1986: 177-178)

The negation of the teleological character of the evolutionary process of life and the embodiment of the absolute in the process of becoming which are present here, are ideas which as we have already seen permeate Bergson's thought. Simmel here, rather unwittingly, brings Nietzsche and Bergson much closer than they are. Although there are indeed resemblances between the two philosophers, there is a crucial difference which keeps them far apart. This rests on the fact that Nietzsche's Life is a downward movement, a movement which is futile and therefore nihilistic. Bergson, despite his meticulous effort not to ascribe a teleological character to *élan vital*, nevertheless indicates that this life-movement is optimistic, and in a semi-agnostic manner, he wishfully prophesizes that it has the potential to surpass even death! A further analysis of this notion of Bergson's is postponed for a later section. For the moment, we turn to the relation of vitalism to the *Geisteswissenschaften*.

The transference of life-philosophy from the purely philosophical to the social scientific realm, can be attributed to Dilthey. We have seen elsewhere (see chapter 3), the closeness of his scheme to Simmel's. The relativism or even relationism of Simmel's

¹⁶⁹ "Le but de la vie est la vie même", in Simmel, ([1912] 1990b : 76)

predecessor lies on the basis of his *lebensphilosophie*, and it was through his philosophy of history and social sciences, that it culminated in the interpretative method. The psychologistic attitude, which is covertly detectable in most of interpretative sociology, stems from the mysterious character which the early classical sociologists have attributed to life. A consequence of this was that almost in all of them (Dilthey, Simmel, Weber, Mannheim) a kind of relativism is detectable, albeit in a different form. Dilthey for example maintains that :

Life consists of parts, of experiences which are inwardly related to each other. Every particular experience refers to a self of which it is a part ; it is structurally interrelated to other parts. Everything which pertains to mind is interrelated : interconnectedness is, therefore, a category originating from life. (Dilthey 1976: 211)

So, the problems which Dilthey addressed through his relativistic-vitalistic methodology were to be more deeply formulated by Simmel. In the latter's thought, vitalism reached the apogee of its development and influence in sociology. For most of his sociological observations are impregnated or even substantiated by vitalism. I will examine of course, Simmel's contribution to vitalism in detail, in the following sections. However, I feel I should stress the importance of his formulations for the shaping of later sociology, for it was Simmel's effort to remove from relativism the taint of negativity with which it was hitherto been associated with. This is one of the reasons why he was condemned to oblivion since in the eyes of the scholars of that time he was an ardent relativist, therefore an enemy of scientific procedure. It is even more surprising to see that acute thinkers such as Mannheim, whose thought has been fundamentally shaped by Simmel, failed to see the positive integration of Simmel's relativism with vitalism, and the useful consequences it could yield for sociology.

Parenthetically here, one can mention Oswald Spengler, whose *The Decline of the West* represents vitalism in its extreme version. His vitalism is so closely linked with cultural relativism that one can have difficulties distinguishing the two. The hostility of German thought towards industrialization and modernity finds in Spengler its most ardent supporter. If one strips Spengler's work of the plethora of historical and anthropological details, one is left with pure vitalism. The massive cultural changes which have occurred in the West, have led to the eventual worship of symbolic representation. The static reality has taken over the dynamic one, a fact which is epigrammatically captured by Spengler in the following quotation:

Space "is", (i.e. exists, in and with our sense-world) - as a self-extension while we are living the ordinary life of dream, impulse, intuition and conduct, and as space in the strict sense in the moments

of stained attention. "Time", on the contrary, is a *discovery*, which is only made by thinking. We create it as an idea or notion and do not begin till much later to suspect that *we ourselves are Time*, inasmuch as we live. ([italics in the original] Spengler 1926: 122)

It is therefore with Spengler where the relativistic epistemology is placed at the centre of all thought and all explanation. Spengler's excessive dismissal of objectivity, and his overall inflexibility, have condemned him into oblivion. Although at his time his views were quite influential, they gradually became ossified basically because of the author's outspoken but often uncritical and uncompromising proclamation of relativism.

Since Spengler, relativism was left to the hands of people who were sympathetic to its major premises, but two who did not wish to be laden with its label. These are the cases of Max Scheler and Karl Mannheim. The case of the latter is a more striking one, since he also drew on vitalism, or at least its main premises. Both thinkers though, sought to re-name relativism in what proved to be a futile attempt to make themselves congenial to the academic community of the times. Scheler's "relative stabilization", and Mannheim's "relationism" functioned primarily in providing different methodological foci for what previously would have been the task of relativism. The moving essence of life-experience is what points to the methodological problems of functionalistic and mechanistic theories. But Mannheim failed to see that this paradigmatic framework which he sought to establish for his newly - baptized "relationism" did very little in authenticating the novelty of the concept, for in fact, this framework had already existed in Simmel's relativism in a much more articulate and plausible form. This is primarily why one detects inconsistencies in Mannheim's system, which are not to be found in Simmel's. One can also identify the profound influence which Bergson exerted on Mannheim's view of life-experience as movement, in passages such as :

The world of external objects and of psychic experience appears to be in a continuous flux. Verbs are more adequate symbols for this situation than nouns. The fact that we give names to things which are in flux implies inevitably a certain stabilization oriented along the lines of collective activity. The derivation of our meanings emphasizes and stabilizes that aspect of things which is relevant to activity and covers up, in the interest of collective action, the perpetually fluid process underlying all things. (Mannheim 1936: 22)

The analogies with Bergson's ideas which bear upon the cosmic movement of things, the utility behind all action and abstraction from the fluid reality, as well as the eventual but static symbolic and linguistic translation of the contents of reality in meaningful terms, manifest themselves in an indicative way in Mannheim's above passage. Mannheim's failure lies on the fact that he attempted to demythologise relativism, without noticing that

vitalism, which as we have demonstrated, he unequivocally accepted, throws him back to the realm he sought the escape from. In a typically Bergsonian manner, he asserts that the main "intellectual task" is "to learn to think dynamically and relationally rather than statically".¹⁷⁰

Max Weber made perhaps the only conscious effort towards a non-relativistic breakthrough in German sociology, although he was not entirely successful. This was due to the subjectivistic character of much of his sociological epistemology, which eventually was replaced by relativism :

Depending on the latest view adopted, one thing is the Devil and the other God as far as the individual is concerned, and the individual must decide which, *for him* , is God and which is the Devil. And this is so throughout the orders of life [...] ([italics in the original] Weber in Lukács 1980: 616).

It was this relativistic character of knowledge which actually led Weber to formulate a methodology based on interpretative understanding. But this quasi-psychological mode of explanation led Weber to assert, as Dilthey had already done before him, that the true reference point was life itself which, however, could not be conceived in its totality. Again, the fragments of Bergsonism are traceable in Weber who acknowledges the agnostic essence of reality and the unpredictable consequences of life's generative force :

Life, with its irrational reality and its store of possible meanings is inexhaustible. The concrete form in which value relevance occurs, remains perpetually in flux, ever subject to change in the dimly seen future of human culture. The light which emanates from these highest evaluative ideas always falls on an ever changing finite segment of the vast chaotic stream of events, which flows away through time. (Weber 1949: 111)

Following Weber, there is only Mannheim - on whom I have briefly touched - as the last thinker whose social theory displayed overtly, affinities with Bergson's vitalism. Since Mannheim, we fail to trace the influence of life-philosophy for the development of sociology, since these particular aspects, especially as far as Simmel is concerned, were deliberately neglected by conservative academic thought. Modern sociological epistemology has moved away from the issue of vitalism which is literally, non-existent even in the contemporary philosophical discourse. However, I feel that the strong connections between vitalism and relativism, along with the relevance of both epistemological movements for the study of modern culture, will provide an adequate

¹⁷⁰ Mannheim, (1936 : 87)

complementary framework for sociological description and explanation. I have shown how the emergence of relativism and its manifestations inheres in life-philosophy ; now I turn to the exposition of vitalism's significance for the sociology of culture and of knowledge, through Simmel's application of Bergson's philosophy, to the social realm.

b) Bergson's "élan vital ":

Although the main outline of Bergson's vitalism has already been exposed, there is still one element which I have not touched upon. That is, life's generative capacity for creation. Despite the fact that Bergson usually talks about biological life while Simmel employs it in a more metaphysical sense, there are fundamental similarities in their application of the concept. In fact, one could assert that Simmel transfers the concept of "life" from the biological realm to the social one, without really substantial alterations. Bergson maintains that

[...] life is, [...] a tendency to act on inert matter. The direction of this action is not predetermined ; hence the unforeseeable variety of forms which life, in evolving, sows along its path. (Bergson 1911a:102)

The salient point is here, that life, in the biological sense, extends its boundaries in its effort to overcome them. The reader who is familiar with Simmel will notice the apparent resemblance. For, in fact, the kernel of Simmel's notion of life and its transcendence, its inability to be enclosed in its own forms, is surreptitiously discernible in Bergson's *Creative Evolution* where one reads :

Life in its entirety, regarded as a creative evolution, [...] transcends finality, if we understand by finality the realization of an idea conceived or conceivable in advance. The category of finality is therefore too narrow for life in its entirety. It is, on the other hand, often too wide for a particular manifestation of life taken separately. (Bergson 1911a: 236)

Let us translate this passage into Simmel's language. If we replace the notion of "finality" with Simmel's idea of "form", we really get a faithful version of sociological vitalism. Eventually, life is presented as inexhaustible, defying thus representation under a particular form, while on the other hand as Simmel indeed asserts, form itself may be a too wide category, for the representation or expression of a particular content of life. The "unceasing transformation" of life is what underlines Bergson's optimistic philosophy. Now, each major transformation, in the biological sphere which is what the author refers to, is elevated into an absolute, or rather a definitive stage in the life-process. This, Bergson holds to be natural in the function of intelligence which seeks the representation

of the dynamic in the static. Bergson, in a somewhat nebulous fashion, accounts for the reduction of the movement of life to its fixed interpretation according to particular biological stages :

And we must remember, above all, that each species behaves as if the general movement of life stopped at it instead of passing through it. It thinks only of itself, it lives only for itself. Hence the numberless struggles that we behold in nature. Hence a discord, striking and terrible, but for which the original principle of life must not be held responsible. (Bergson 1911a: 268)

It is actually Simmel who ingeniously transferred Bergson's ideas to the realm of history and society. The negation of the teleological character of history and of society, both of which are permanently in a state of change, reverberates the idea of the upward movement of the vital impetus in the biological sense in which Bergson used it. I proceed therefore, with Simmel's philosophical interpretation of the concept of "life".

c) Simmel : The Transcendence of Life :

The later period of Simmel's thought is epitomized by his embrace of metaphysics. The dormant metaphysical hints contained in most of his sociological work, are passionately released via the thread of vitalism. The cogency of Simmel's metaphysical exposition owes much to the intellectual breakthrough of Bergson's philosophy. Although Simmel does not acknowledge the profound influence which Bergson exerted on his thought, the reader who is familiar with the work of both men, cannot but be astonished with the extent to which Simmel uses Bergson's philosophy. The first chapter of the former's *Lebensanschauung : Vier Metaphysische Kapitel* is nothing but a direct display of Bergsonism, although one should admit that there are a few deviations which give Simmel's essay a coherent but partially original outlook.

The starting point of Simmel's argument is indeed resonant of the French philosopher's major premises. Simmel actually, departs from the infinite wealth of reality and man's attempt to represent it conceptually. Man cannot but employ concepts which would provide orientation within the abyss of world-experience. That this symbolic and *de facto* arbitrary selection and representation, leads to a relativity of knowledge, Simmel does not deny. In fact, he sees this as the destiny of all knowledge. In reflecting on Bergson and in light of Nietzsche's and Vaihinger's fictional knowledge, Simmel points to the epistemological problems of Bergsonian vitalism :

The contrast between identity and non-identity vanishes with the continuity of the process of change. At this point it should be noted that it is just in the fact that Bergson approaches pragmatism so closely, where all perception originates and it is true, only as a result of helping us in our preservation and progress in Life, and it

is actually thanks to it that he is able to get round this problem. Because, while he admits this usefulness as a cause and as a criterion for scientific knowledge ; while he takes it from its ideal realm into praxis, he proclaims that this, in fact, is not pure and actual Reality. What we call awareness/knowledge (and in fact, all scientific knowledge is equivalent to mechanicity) is not truth for the sake of praxis, it is but a falsification for the sake of praxis. (Simmel 1922 : 137)

Simmel acutely points to the arbitrary conception of Bergson's Absolute ; instead as Simmel proposes, Bergson failed to conceive the tragic character of life which in order "to be able to exist it has to transform into not-life".¹⁷¹ It is interesting here to observe that Simmel implicitly transfers his notion of the "tragedy of culture", where man is confronted by a growing mass of cultural artifacts without being able to absorb it, therefore being in a state between having culture and not having culture, to the realm of knowledge. Because, for him man is destined to be in the intermediate state between knowing and not knowing.¹⁷² This is what I call, and this is to be found in the whole of Simmel's work, "the tragedy of knowledge". It seems that this laconic expression contains much truth within Simmel's philosophy. The perpetual oscillation of man between absoluteness and relativity holds a privileged place in Simmel's epistemology.¹⁷³

Simmel, as Bergson does, sees utility and practicality as the basis of knowledge and understanding. Both of these are guided primarily by intelligence, although it seems that Simmel unlike Bergson now, includes intuition as well, as a factor which abstracts from reality particular contents. He says :

Our imagination and *primary* apprehension stake out areas from the infinite fullness of reality and the infinite modes of apprehending it, probably to the end that whatever magnitude is thereby delimited provides an adequate basis for our practical conduct. ([italics in the original] Simmel 1971: 355)

The fact, however, that human beings are capable of conscious reflexion on their action and thought, points to the only optimistic fragment in Simmel's late thought. The realization of the partiality of our knowledge, is what really places us above it. This act, he calls "an act of self-transcendence". In a Bergsonian vein, Simmel acknowledges the problematic nature of any attempt of the human spirit to grasp the totality of things. Great

¹⁷¹ Simmel (1922 : 138)

¹⁷² "Plato's definition of the philosopher as he who stands between knowing and not-knowing holds for man in general." (Simmel, 1971 : 354)

¹⁷³ For an extensive discussion of what we feel represents better the idea of the "tragedy of knowledge" in Simmel, see his *The Philosophy of Money*. (1978 : 101-119)

philosophies, he argues, lose their validity in the one dimensional version of the world which they offer, as soon as their agents attempt to lay them as models of explanation of the world. The fact though, that everyone is aware of this partial character immanent in all thought or perception, places man above this "one-sidedness, without thereby ceasing to stand in it".¹⁷⁴ This is indeed, a paradoxical conception and Simmel is aware of that.

Simmel tries to dissolve this polarity of opposites by placing them into a sort of unity rather than conceiving them as extreme antitheses. The relativization of all contents of life, indeed of life in general, culminates in Simmel's conception of an indivisible unity where one can schematically conceive it only by differences of degree rather than kind. The auxiliary tool here comes again, from Bergson. The idea of life as unity or movement leads Simmel to an inevitable discussion of Time. Simmel here, unequivocally adheres to Bergsonism. He speaks here of "real time", which cannot be found in reality. The present is an artificial notion since it is evident that we live in the past and the future. But not in the present ! The latter is nothing more than the spatial representation of time, which includes "a bit of the past and a somewhat smaller bit of the future".¹⁷⁵ The antipodal modes for the preservation of past in the present are for Simmel :

objectification in concepts and pictures which, from the moment of their creation, become the reproducible possession of countless succeeding generations, and *memory* , through which the past of the subjective life not only becomes the cause of that of the present but also continues over into the present with its contents relatively unchanged. ([italics in the original] Simmel 1971: 360)

The first mode clearly belies the continuity of life since it embodies static reified entities. It is the second mode which Simmel sees as the agent of the uninterrupted flow of life. Of course, as for Bergson there is no definite goal towards which the *élan vital* is directed, so for Simmel the evanescent movement of life escapes any definitive objectification which would indeed imply teleology. The Platonic "no longer" and the Aristotelian "not yet" are automatically resolved within the movement, the duration of life. Simmel, in a less than transparent formulation, declares that

Time is life seen apart from its contents, because life alone transcends the atemporal present of every other kind of reality in both directions and thereby realizes, all by itself, the temporal dimension, that is,

¹⁷⁴ Simmel, (1971 : 358)

¹⁷⁵ Simmel,(1971 : 359)

time. (Simmel 1971: 362)¹⁷⁶

But who are the agents of life ? The answer is found in Simmel's omnipresent individualism :

Yet the bearers of this process [life], those who make it up, are *individuals* , that is closed, self-centered, unambiguously distinct beings. While the stream of life flows through those individuals (more accurately : flows *as* these individuals), it dams up in each one of them and becomes a sharply outlined form. **Each individual then asserts itself as something complete against other individuals of its kind as well as against the total environment, and does not tolerate any blurring of its boundary.** Here lies an ultimate, metaphysically problematic condition of life : that it is boundless continuity and at the same time boundary-determined ego. ([*italics in the original* ; emphasis added] Simmel 1971: 362)¹⁷⁷

This attitude of Simmel is the precursor of his hostility towards modernisation. The individualistic approach of sociological explanation stems from the idea of the individual as a whole, as a totality which struggles at retaining its purity. The mass of socially constructed directives - in the form of rules, norms, mores etc - and the widening of the lag between subjective and objective spirit, leaves the individual with a desire for purity and distinctness, previously unencountered. However, the periphery of his being is the boundary which every individual sets as a goal to surpass. Whether, by imagination or intuition, whether through art or religion, the transcendence of this boundary is the *true absolute* for the individual, indeed the *true absolute* for life itself.

The intersection between relativism and vitalism, is again given a new dimension.

¹⁷⁶ This might take a more articulate form in another definition : "*The mode of existence which does not restrict its reality to the present moment, thereby placing past and future in the realm of the unreal, is what we call life* ". (*italics in the original*) Simmel, 1971 : 362)

¹⁷⁷ Bergson holds exactly the same, albeit in the biological sense : " [...] life can progress only by means of the living, which are its depositories". (Bergson, 1911a : 243). This theme recurs also in the thought of Martin Heidegger. His philosophy is equally subjectivistic, postulating the synonymity of being and time, the same way as both Bergson and Simmel equate life (or individual life), with time. The testimony of Hans-Georg Gadamer is helpful : "As early as 1923 Heidegger spoke to me with admiration of the late writings of Georg Simmel. This was not just a general acknowledgement of Simmel as a philosopher. The specific stimulus that Heidegger had received from his work will be apparent to anyone who today reads in the first of the four "Metaphysical chapters" gathered together under the title *Lebensanschauung*, what the dying Simmel conceived as his philosophical task." (Gadamer, 1975 : 521). Gadamer refers here to what I have displayed as Simmel's equalization of life and time. The evolution though of Heidegger's philosophy departed significantly from Simmel's while it became diametrically opposed to Bergson's. The latter's "real time" which was an upward movement, was incompatible with Heidegger's subjectivistic nihilism which made time a descend towards death. All three thinkers though, are at one, in the sense that they undermined the prevalent conception of time, rendering it spurious, illusory and therefore unreal.

Simmel had always sought to establish a sort of functional relativism, a relativism, the refutation of which would have been impossible, since it would not undermine the notion of truth, but it would actually replace it by the notion of reciprocity. Let us see what Simmel actually means, when he sees this idea feasible only within the context of vitalism:

By virtue of our highest, self-transcending consciousness at any moment we are absolute above our relativity. But as the further advance of this process again relativizes the absolute, the transcendence of life appears as the true absoluteness, in which the contrast between the absolute and the relative is collapsed. (Simmel 1971: 364)

Simmel does not deny the perpetual state of relativity which life imposes on man. But, leaning towards a more optimistic standpoint, he sees as the essence of life, the transcendence of any point which is posited as absolute limit. To this attitude the influence of Bergson is again evident. The pessimism of Simmel has actually been marginalised in his late *lebensphilosophie*, to be replaced by an optimism, the basis of which lies on the irreducible essence of individuality. It is my contention that at the core of the evolution of Simmel's life-philosophy, lies the burden of objective culture, which he saw as the essence of modernisation (this is the task of the following section). It seems that Simmel applies some sort of evolutionary scheme on his vitalism. Indeed both he and Bergson seem to assert that there is progress in life and its ramifications (individual life, cultural life, artistic life, etc.), albeit towards no particular goal.

Life generates forms which are absolutely unique in their pure existence, despite the fact that they may be "identically reproduced in countless bits of matter". Simmel sees here form the same way Bergson sees matter. Although both are creations of the vital impetus, they still constitute the opposition to life, the deep contradiction ingrained in it. Life strives to ascend, to overcome the ossified forms, and in its effort to do so, creates more forms, for it is only through forms where life can be understood. The same way the religious feeling rationalizes and formalizes the notion of God in order to be able to conceive a glimpse of His Being, the same way humans use forms in order to reduce Life into meaningful terms. Within the social context this is put forward as follows :

If now life - as a cosmic, generic, singular phenomenon - is such a continuous stream, there is good reason for its profound opposition against form. This opposition appears as the unceasing, usually unnoticed (but also often revolutionary) battle of ongoing life against the historical pattern and formal inflexibility of any given cultural content, thereby becoming the innermost impulse toward cultural change. (Simmel 1971: 366)

This "usually unnoticed" struggle, one can label as the "unintended consequences of human action". We have seen elsewhere (chapter 3), that unanticipated human action plays an important role in Simmel's notion of historiography or indeed, of any research in the social and cultural sciences. Here, though, it is given a further dimension since Life accounts for these uninintended outcomes of human action. Thus, instead of seeing the individuals themselves as the determining units of action, Simmel conceives them simply as agents of the life-process. Therefore, "individuality is everywhere something alive, and life is everywhere individual".¹⁷⁸

Whether, in Simmel's sympathy towards Spinoza's monism or in his application of Bergson's absolute-in-life, one is tempted to assert that he attempted to surmount relativism via his metaphysics. The difference with Bergson is though, that the movement of life, for Simmel, *is not* the true absolute. Instead, the absolute is momentary and it is realized *only* in the act of self-transcendence. It actually rests on the paradoxical idea that life's absoluteness is established by its relativity. Simmel writes :

Self-transcendence thus appears as the unified act of building up and breaking through life's bounds, its *alter* , as the character of life's absoluteness, which makes its analysis into reified opposites quite intelligible. ([italics in the original] Simmel 1971: 368)

It is here evident that the Simmelian edifice is permeated, from its lowest foundations, by the interrelatedness of all the elements within an entity. This entity is Life. The contradictory character of this entity which "lives" as form, transcends form, and yet itself is nothing but Form, points for solution in the need for supra-logical explanation. The irrationalist aspects of both Bergson and Simmel, manifest themselves in the form of the logical contradictions which this formulation presents. The vital link between supra-logical thinking and relationsm is, according to Simmel, what points to the solution of this inconsistency. The stringent functions of logical thinking prevent the being who is exclusively guided by intelligence, in seeing that "the individual form" is not "an intrinsically valid, real or fixed structure, discontinuous with other forms", and as a corollary, "in logical contrast to movement", *but rather* as a relational element within the flux which "streams beyond this and that definite form", and "overflows *every* form because it is *form*".¹⁷⁹

On the contrary, the process of formalization is the debasement or the estrangement of life from itself. Simmel follows Bergson in his repudiation of spatial and symbolic

¹⁷⁸ Simmel, (1971 : 367)

¹⁷⁹ Simmel, (1971 : 370)

translation of life. However as we shall see in the next section he is not as fierce or as one-sided as Bergson and this is his particular advantage over the French philosopher. The plasticity of Simmel's thought, and his fecund utilization of social life as a general context for the foundation of his metaphysics have imported into vitalism a sociologically relevant framework, which Bergson perhaps never attempted to achieve. These sociological implications of vitalism, which have been only obliquely pointed at, I am now ready to expose.

d) Simmel : Life and Culture (i) :

The basis of all historical and cultural transformation, lies on the transition from one form to another. This alternation of forms reflects life's generative capacity for change. In biology this would have been tantamount to organic changes within living beings ; in sociology it would take the form of changes of structure which result into novel modes of social life. The cultural lag between subjective and objective spirit, encompasses the deep contradiction of life and the creation of its forms. The elevation of forms onto a reified status, permits as a consequence, their treatment as absolute entities, where usually they attempt to construe and then artificially absorb the totality of life's contents. For example, the omnipotent form of religion in past centuries, has given space for the evolution and perhaps its gradual replacement by reason and scientific technique. The - often unconscious - equation of the latter realm with knowledge, reflects the autonomous character of forms as well as the one-dimensional orientation which a particular society may have, if *one* form preponderates.

In modern society though, as Simmel interpreted it at the time, there is a general characteristic which prevails, but defies form. This "lack of form" which permeates modern life has its roots in life's fierce struggle against obsolete, traditional forms. And since our era represents the rare case - purely in chronic terms - of being an era of transition, it is thus distinguished by its growing formlessness. Simmel provides, with remarkable sagacity, the diagnosis of our times :

Since this struggle, in extent and intensity, does not permit concentration on the creation of new forms, it makes a virtue of necessity and insists on a fight against forms simply because they are forms. This is probably only possible in an epoch where cultural forms are conceived of as an exhausted soil which has yielded all that it could grow, which, however, **is still completely covered by products of its former fertility.** ([emphasis added] Simmel 1971: 377)

The spasmodic reaction of new trends against the residual effects of former institutions serves well in confirming Simmel's prophetic understanding. The hints which point to the replacement of the nuclear - heterosexual family form, by the new, albeit still

embryonic, homosexual family, reflects the growing dissatisfaction with the characteristics and functions with which the prevalent family type has been associated. The paradox in this situation though, is the fact that the transformation, although carried out within the realm of the social, it has originally been geared towards a change in biological - natural forms. Perhaps, a better example lies within the institution of religion. Despite the fact that it is obviously declining as a total form, since it fails to satisfactorily account for current needs, its contents - that is, religious feelings - find different channels for expression and representation.¹⁸⁰

The general malaise of modern culture is found by Simmel in the lack of any fixity, in the extreme relativization of every cultural aspect, in other words in the lack of any stable form, which would not embrace the totality of existence, but it would provide instead, a valid frame of reference. Whereas in previous cultural epochs, there has been a form which would include within its periphery the plurality of social life, modern culture seems to be devoid of any such form. Simmel, in an aphoristic manner, deplors the fact that

[...] the basic impulse behind contemporary culture is a negative one, and this is why, unlike men in all [...] earlier epochs, we have been for some time now living without any shared ideal, even perhaps without any ideals at all. (Simmel 1971: 380)

The atomized and highly heterogeneous culture we live in, impedes the creation and evolution of any such ideal. The fragmentation of any collective consciousness, has resulted into the rise of purely egotistic impulses, which ironically, have acquired an unconscious quasi-idealistic character. The contradiction of modern existence can be now discernible. The *polemic against any form*, has become *the* form of societal life. It is difficult here to ascertain whether Simmel is right in maintaining that there is no ideal in modern society. Basically, because it is not entirely clear whether *technology* fulfills this role, or whether the chaotically subjectivistic trend of modernity has been bequeathed to us by *technological proliferation*.

The "frenetic pace" of modern life, finds its embodiment in youth. The optimism which resides in every mature person in the form of hope in the future generations, finds its best externalization in the youth of a particular society and era. Again, Simmel blends uniquely, biological and sociological explanation :

Whereas adults because of their weakening vitality, concentrate their

¹⁸⁰ The analogy with Durkheim's transition from mechanical to organic solidarity may be apparent here, and it acquires perhaps a better formulation within the notions of modernization and differentiation which recur in Simmel (exclusively within the notion of religion).

attention more and more on the objective *contents* of life, **which in the present meaning could as well be designated as its forms**, youth is more concerned with the process of life. ([italics in the original ; emphasis added] Simmel 1971: 384)

On the other hand, as Simmel points out, the uncertainty of life (which is caused by the certainty of death), which is increasingly felt as age grows, causes adults to seek stability usually in the form of holding onto traditional and already tried modes of life. This seems to be the reason for the skepticism which always permeates the adult mind in its attitude towards new ways of life introduced by youth. The nostalgic character of adult thinking seems to have more to do with the remembrance of past vitality, rather than with any rational justification as to the superiority of former institutions over present ones. Simmel emphasizes assiduously that vitality means originality. In a purely Bergsonian manner he polemicizes against the deification of every form, because form means reified life, and therefore alienated life.

It is not, therefore, accidental that Simmel reaches vitalism through description and criticism of modern culture. His vitalism echoes the targets towards which Bergsonian life-philosophy was directed, namely functional-mechanistic theories of knowledge, and metaphysics.

The polemical character of Simmel's sociological description of modernity, acquires a more subversive essence in a brief examination of marriage and prostitution. The all-pervasive individualism, which imbues the late thought of Simmel finds here under the guise of vitalism its most intense expression. Simmel sees eroticism as one of the most vital elements of the soul. Describing an ethical trend at that time, called "the new morality", Simmel launches implicitly his attack on these dominant cultural forms. Marriage is seen as a non-erotic and stagnant formalization of individuality, while in prostitution one detects the vulgar degradation of eroticism.¹⁸¹ Simmel is not very enthusiastic about the anarchic tones which "the new morality" uses for its attack, and points acutely to the internal contradiction in their argument, namely, that eroticism within culture requires a form of expression. However, he seems unwilling or perhaps incapable of escaping the contradiction which resides in the whole problem of life and

¹⁸¹ Simmel, (1971 : 388) ; similar arguments are to be found in his *The Philosophy of Money* (1978 : 370-384), and in his *On Women, Sexuality and Love* (1984). The role of money is seen as a catalyst for the evolution of prostitution which Simmel generally averts, from a feminist's and individualist's point of view. It is interesting to see that he traces in capitalism and in man's oppression of women, the zenith of prostitution. The exploitation of sexuality, not only thwarts the pure erotic aspects of the individual, but it relegates the female entity into the status of a mere commodity. Elsewhere, Simmel observes that the position of prostitution depends largely on the state of social sentiments not necessarily endemic to capitalism (!) (Simmel, 1988a : 28). The analogy with Durkheim's functional explanation of crime in relation to the collective conscience, may be worth of consideration.

culture, marriage and prostitution being only ramifications of it. Thus, he maintains that

Genuine erotic life in fact flows naturally in individual channels. Opposition is directed against forms because they force it into generalized schemata and thereby overpower its uniqueness. The struggle between life and form is fought here less abstractly and less metaphysically as a struggle between individuality and generalization. (Simmel 1971: 389)

The analogy between Simmel and Bergson manifests itself clearly as we reach the end of this first section on vitalism and culture. Bergson, we have seen, used the dualism of instinct and intelligence to account for the concept of life. Instinct (and as its higher form, intuition) has been seen as genuine, pure aspect of life capable of grasping the Absolute (in Bergson's case, the duration of life). Simmel uses the dualism of content and form, in order to account for social and cultural life, whereas Bergson discussed primarily biological life, in the same manner. Content may be regarded as the social manifestation of instinct, while form reveals affinities with the way Bergson employs the term intelligence. The functions of both intelligence and form are to abstract elements from life, rationalize them and eventually exhaust them under rigid categories. Consequently it seems that instinct and content are given priority as epistemological notions since they are presented as pure and dynamic expressions of life. The substantial deviation of Simmel, lies in the fact that his Absolute is the self-transcendence of life, although one could assert that the concept of *élan vital* and its ascendant movement against forms, provides a similar objective. What is important though, is the fact that whereas Bergson seeks to eliminate contradictions which stem from the work of intelligence, Simmel accepts the paradoxical character of life as something which can take "the form of its antithesis, that is, only in the form of *form*."¹⁸² In what could be construed as a criticism of Bergson's one-sidedness, considering the conceptual representation of life, Simmel claims that

The essence of life would be denied if one tried to form an exhaustive conceptual definition. In order for conscious life to be fully self-conscious, it would have to do without concepts altogether, for conceptualization inevitably brings on the reign of forms ; **yet concepts are essential to self-consciousness. The fact that the possibilities of expression are so limited by the essence of life does not diminish its momentum as an idea.** ([emphasis added] Simmel 1971: 392)

It is to Simmel's credit that he avoids the dogmatism of Bergson, in that he does not deprive either intelligence or form the potential of fruitful understanding. We have seen,

¹⁸² Simmel, (1971 : 392)

therefore the implications of this scheme for Simmel's analysis and evaluation of contemporary culture refracted through the prism of vitalism. I now turn to some further aspects in relation to culture and vitalism, which are drawn by Simmel from a more radical, biased but ultimately acute perspective.

e) Simmel : Life and Culture (ii) :

So far, the attitude of Simmel has been more or less Bergsonian. In what follows, Simmel becomes increasingly Nietzschean in his treatment of the modern culture which undergoes severe disease and decay, rather than a simple malaise. In fact, it seems - and in this sense we are in agreement with Georg Lukács'¹⁸³ appraisal of Simmel's irrationalism - that vitalism had been carried into a too destructive form.

The period just before the eruption of World War I, provided the adequate soil for Simmel's polemical analysis of modern culture. One of his late essays, titled *The Crisis of Culture*, emerges as perhaps the most controversial aspect of Simmel's work. The reason for this, might be that Simmel incorporates his views on vitalism, individualism and modernity, in a detailed scrutiny of modern Western culture before its "fall". The phraseology which he employs, displays clearly the melancholic but determined anathema which he launches against the last stages of a gradually deteriorating civilization.

The reader may recall that in the previous subsection I referred to the growing role of technology as the aspect which monopolizes modern urban man. Simmel, seems to have anticipated the inward movement of technology from the periphery to the centre of human existence, a consequence of which is the materiality and consumerism of his, and indeed our, times. The carcinoma of modern culture is to be found then, in the

[...] resulting tendency towards fragmentation and uncertainty of purpose [which] is maximized by the fact that the various means which serve our ends, our "technology" in the widest sense of the word, are constantly becoming both more extensive and more intensive. (Simmel 1976: 253)

This description summarizes also the chief reasons for the decline of a culture. These, Simmel locates in : a) the overemphasis which members of a society place upon the actual means of attaining a goal, which eventually become superordinate to the substantive ends, and b) the objectification / reification of cultural artifacts or cultural spheres, which consequently evade human control, or even defy any realistic potential for being absorbed as objects of knowledge. Therefore, even within a certain realm of knowledge, such as art, the individual cannot but be limited to a marginal position without *ever* being able to absorb, the multitude of artistic movements or trends, along with their concomitant

¹⁸³ See his *The Destruction of Reason* (1980 : 442-459)

theoretical and practical implications or intricacies. This constant worship of means over ends, which culminates in the dichotomy between money and utility of goods, or even between scientific method and result, is also stressed by Bergson in his rather hesitant explication of social life. He feels that

[...] it is the spirit of invention which has not always operated in the best interests of humanity. It has created a mass of new needs ; it has not taken the trouble to ensure for the majority of men, for all if that were possible, the satisfaction of old needs. To put it more clearly : **though not neglecting the necessary, it has thought too much about the superfluous.** ([emphasis added], Bergson 1935: 264)

Bergson is more compromising, basically because he lacked the sensitivity of Simmel's perception, as to the nature of social phenomena. Undoubtedly, though, with a philosophical doctrine, borne directly out of his aversion towards science and rationality, such as vitalism guiding his thought, one should suspect that had Bergson been more engaged in the sociological description of reality, he would have proceeded in a Simmelian fashion. Simmel enters dangerous territory by employing the major premises of his vitalistic philosophy as a justification of the outbreak of war. In a purely Nietzschean manner, he laments the cultural stalemate of the times :

To attach ultimate significance to relatively secondary aspects of life is one of the psychological dangers of long periods of comfortable and undisturbed peace. They provide unrestricted scope for the greatest variety of activities ; **no violent upheavals compel men to make their choice between what is of primary and what is of secondary importance.** But anyone who has once seen what is usually the most important thing in life - the self and its preservation - become means to something higher, ought to be immune for a while to that squandering of end-status on what is relatively insignificant and peripheral. ([emphasis added], Simmel 1976: 263)

It may be appropriate, in a parenthesis here, to clarify the profound relationship between vitalism and Simmel's abuse of it in relation to the upheaval of that time in Germany. I stressed at the beginning, the influence of Heraclitus for the movement of vitalism. Bergson neglected him completely, while Simmel tried to dissociate himself too, from the Heraclitean flux.¹⁸⁴ Now, Bergson was perhaps right in his decision, for I fail to trace direct links between him and the Greek philosopher. The case of Simmel though seems to be equivocal. Keeping in mind Simmel's conception of Life as the arbitrary generator of change, we read in Heraclitus :

¹⁸⁴ See Simmel, (1971 : 363)

This cosmic order which is the same for all things has not been created, neither by gods nor by men ; it always was, and is, and will be, **an ever living Fire**, flaring up according to measure, and dying out according to measure [...] **In its advance, the Fire will seize, judge, and execute, everything.** ([Emphasis added], Heraclitus in Popper 1962 vol. 1: 15)

The similarity seems to me remarkable. The ascendant character of Life (Fire in Heraclitean terminology), its creative and destroying potential, and its eternal duration are impressively displayed in the above fragment. The fact that Simmel was not famous for his acknowledgements as to his sources and influences, accounts perhaps for the lack of references on Heraclitus. In Bergson's case, the strictly biological version of Life, and the almost complete absence of socio-historical links to this notion, point perhaps, to the neglect of Heraclitus' thought. For, the latter's philosophy, seems to be less a system of metaphysics, but rather a pragmatic application of it to social affairs.¹⁸⁵ What is perhaps more astonishing, is that the relativism of Heraclitus, which directly emanates out of his "flux", reveals profound affinities with Simmel's relationism. We may recall Simmel's exposition of relationism in his *The Philosophy of Money*, where he displays the perpetual alternation between the absolute and the relative whereby one depends for its existence on the other. This form of relationism, is exquisitely integrated in Heraclitus' poetic exposé :

Cold things become warm and warm things become cold ; what is moist becomes dry and what is dry becomes moist [...] **Disease enables us to appreciate health [...] Life and death**, being awake and being asleep, youth and old age, all this is identical ; **for the one turns into the other and the latter returns into the former** [...] The divergent agrees with itself : it is a harmony resulting from the opposite tensions [...] The opposites belong to each other, the best harmony results from discord, and everything develops by strife[...] The path that leads up and the path that leads down are identical [...] The straight path and the crooked path are one

¹⁸⁵ Karl Popper, in his interesting, albeit open to debate, interpretation of Heraclitus' scheme, places his philosophy in the appropriate socio-historical context : "Heraclitus' dynamics of nature in general and especially of social life confirms the view that his philosophy was inspired by the social and political disturbances he had experienced." (Popper, 1962, vol.1, : 16). Thus, the same way Fire would transform reality into something unpredictable, - although the moral judgement which Heraclitus applies to it with the word "judge", seems to refute the notion of unpredictability - , the same way Simmel's Life, in an act of transition or self-transcendence, would create the conditions of radical change, despite the fact that this change (war) would contradict the universal moral standard (by this we mean that although Simmel prefers alive to dead soldiers, he still sees war as an absolute necessity). Simmel poses the fundamental question : "[...] ends and goals are gradually being usurped by means and methods. If these are the symptoms of an ailing culture, does then the war mark the outbreak of the crisis, which can become the first step towards recovery ?"(Simmel, 1976 : 255). The answer, to Simmel's satisfaction, is found in Heraclitus sayings : "One must know that war is universal, and that justice is strife, and that all things develop through strife **and by necessity.**" ({My emphasis}, Heraclitus quoted in Popper, 1962, vol.1, : 16).

and the same[...] For gods, all things are beautiful and good and just; men, however, have adopted some things as just, others as unjust [...] The good and the bad are identical. ([Emphasis added] Heraclitus in Popper 1962 vol.1: 16-17)

The reason why I chose to slightly deviate from my theme, with this brief discussion on Heraclitus and to finish with this exposition of moral relativism, resides on the fact that Heraclitus demonstrated the ethical-epistemological cul-de-sac which Simmel had reached. For, when Simmel justifies war, on the grounds that it is the *only means* towards the desired end, then he contradicts himself by subjecting himself to a blunt acceptance of immoral means for the sake of ends, which as we have demonstrated, clearly averted. Additionally, he proves Heraclitus right, by actually maintaining that a difference between means-ends, and consequently, between good and bad, are only differences of degree rather than kind. There are other "truths" in Heraclitus' previous quotation, which are also overtly detectable in late Simmel. The fact that "disease enables us to appreciate health", finds its perfect analogical counterpart in Simmel's metaphor for the diseased society, and the remedy of war. For, the same way one appreciates the taken-for-granted functional significance of the finger only if he becomes mutilated, the same way, as Simmel believes, society will appreciate the unity of *Gemeinschaft*, only through the destructive demolition of the fragmented and technologically instrumental *Gesellschaft*. The nostalgic character of Tönnies' sociology, acquires with the late Simmel heroic proportions enhanced by nationalistic overtones.¹⁸⁶

The return to vitalistic optimism may as well have come out of this profound need for cultural transformation, of a civilization which had reached its nadir point. Simmel, in a semi-prognostic manner, declares that

[...] in recent years, perhaps since Nietzsche, a certain change has begun [...] The concept of *life* now seems to permeate a multitude of spheres and to have begun to give, as it were, a more unified rhythm to their heartbeat. I believe that the war will be very conducive to this process. For, apart from the common ultimate goal which contemporary cultural movements of all kinds have embraced, they are all suffused with **a passionate vitality bursting forth as it from one common source of energy.** ([italics in the original ; Emphasis added] Simmel 1976: 263)

This "bursting forth" of life is reminiscent of Bergson's metaphors of life as wave or a bursting shell.¹⁸⁷ Following Heraclitean thinking, and anticipating Jünger's militarist

¹⁸⁶ See Simmel's essay "The Idea of Europe" in Simmel (1976).

¹⁸⁷ See Bergson's *Creative Evolution* (1911 : 264, : 280).

ethic and the magical realism that conceives war as a vast aesthetic canvas, Simmel does not hesitate to assert that

It seems certain that the soldier, at least when engaged in vigorous action, feels this action to be an enormous increase in the quantity of life [...] and to be in more direct proximity to its surging dynamism than he is able to feel in his usual working activities. (Simmel 1976: 263-264)¹⁸⁸

The charisma of Simmel, both as writer and as subtle intellect, functions well in making these, otherwise repugnant war writings, seem plausible. Simmel actually reduces the meaning of this intense cultural crisis, to individualism, asserting that "the crisis is deeply familiar and intelligible to us", since "in each of us it is consciously or not, the crisis of our own soul".¹⁸⁹

Is there then, a relationship between vitalism as a philosophical doctrine, and nationalism ? Perhaps not an explicit one ; but then, how does one account for the fact that most of the exponents of vitalism, turned into nationalism? It seems likely that this fact has more to do with the "lost" communal life, versus the schizophrenic character of modernity, rather than with the movement of vitalism itself. However, as we have seen in our discussion so far, the remembrance of *Gemeinschaft*, has had a dominant role in the formulation of the vitalistic philosophy of Nietzsche, Simmel, Bergson and Spengler. The culmination of Simmel's nationalism is clearly demonstrated in the following passage:

It is an undeniable fact that the "Europeans" of the last few decades have been to an extreme degree men of national character : Bismarck and Darwin, Wagner and Tolstoy, Nietzsche and Bergson [...] Everyone of them in fact became one of the creators of "Europe" by developing specifically **national qualities to their extreme limits !** ([emphasis added] Simmel 1976: 268-269)

It would be illusory here to deduce that Simmel had embraced the idea of a united Europe, in the way we envisage it today. Simmel, despite the fact that he sees a transcendence of strict cultural boundaries, resorts to the cultivation of national socio-cultural characteristics

¹⁸⁸ This is another exploration into the idea that one in order to be able to become "good", has to be "evil". That in order to ascend in life, one has to descend into the abyss of war experience. This is an idea which German culture likes to flirt with. Examples are abundant, but more characteristically, one needs to go back to the philosophy of Nietzsche, the literature of Hermann Hesse, or the art of Otto Dix. In the latter's "war paintings" (during WWI), one observes the fascinating incorporation of Nietzsche's struggle between the Dionysian and the Apollonian, or more impressively, the struggle between the Bergsonian "life" against "matter"(death) in war.

¹⁸⁹ Simmel, (1976 : 265-266)

which would somehow prevail as dominant trends in the continent of Europe. How this could be done seems to us to be a paradox ; for the logical consequence of the self-preservation of national identity - in the wider sense of the word - would lead to a continuous fragmentation and eventual autonomization of separate national groups, communities and societies. What Simmel asks, seems to be contra man's general disposition towards differentiation. Perhaps the interpenetration of dominant intellectual movements, in countries like Germany, France, G.Britain or Russia, was what led Simmel to identify a "European Spirit", as the amalgamation of the élite of the continent. What escapes Simmel's thought though, is the generally acknowledged historical fact, that élites prevail at the expense of the "weak"; and since no élite has attained the highest degree of inbuilt protection which would guarantee self-preservation, then cynical thought is led to acceptance and glorification of war : death, as a condition for life ! Whose death though ? Obviously, neither Heraclitus', nor Nietzsche's, nor Simmel's, nor Heidegger's own deaths. But rather, the "death" of Plato's and Heraclitus' "Slave", of Nietzsche's "herd animal", of Simmel's ignorant, "atrophied" human subject, or of Heidegger's "anyone-self". Without neglecting the greatness of Germanic philosophy, I feel that it is evident why its diseased character received inspiration from the ancient Greek spirit, a spirit which drew its premises from the social fermentation of the times. But that the German philosophers were so blind as to not be able to see the destructive flaws of their predecessors, is hard to accept, as it is hard to accept that the moral ontology of the Greeks was reduced to nothing more than the existential nihilism of their successors.

f) On death :

These problems acquire a further dimension if seen exclusively within the framework of vitalism. The notion of death was unavoidable, since in everyday life, it is accepted as the opposite of life, that is, its limit. The approach of Bergson and Simmel, was nevertheless fundamentally different on the issue of death. Whereas Simmel saw death as inextricably linked with the life-process, Bergson placed death as a limit potentially to be overcome, and that's where his philosophy draws its optimistic character from. Bergson, in his *Creative Evolution* , brings death very sporadically into the picture. In what follows, Bergson summarizes his whole vitalistic philosophy :

As the smallest grain of dust is bound up with our entire solar system, drawn along with it in that undivided movement of descent which is materiality itself, so all organized beings, from the humblest to the highest, from the first origins of life to the time in which we are, and in all places as in all times, do but evidence a single impulsion, the inverse of the movement of matter, and in itself indivisible. All the living hold together, and all yield to the same tremendous push. The animal takes its stand on the plant, man bestrides animality, and the whole of humanity, in space and in time,

is one immense army galloping beside and before and behind each of us in an overwhelming charge able to beat down every resistance and clear the most formidable obstacles, **perhaps even death.** ([emphasis added] Bergson 1911a: 285-286)

A similarity with Simmel, lies in more general epistemological facts, rather than in the idea of death. Bergson presupposes here the functional unity and interrelatedness of all the living elements in the universe, the same way as he sees a unity of all the elements in matter. Simmel openly expresses this idea in *The Philosophy of Money*, where he demonstrates the ascendent movement from the interrelatedness of all the elements in the universe, towards their "functional unity" in the cosmos.¹⁹⁰ This similarity is more palpably expressed in one of Bergson's admirers, Alfred Weber. I have stressed earlier on (see "Introduction") that Weber's thought is of much use to us in understanding the progressive element in vitalism. Weber proceeds in his exposition of biological vitalism in a way which I feel synthesizes important elements of both Bergson and Simmel. Although Weber does not explicitly refer to death, the following formulation of a vitalism was based on the metaphysical character of life which can find expression also in its strictly biological formulation. Describing developments in biology, Weber sets perhaps unwittingly the unity of *élan vital* and *lebensphilosophie* :

Proceeding as Vitalism (Driesch and others related to him) or in some other form (e.g. Richard Woltereck) from the life-carriers as self-organizing units possessing an "Outside" and an "Inside" and harbouring invisible "powers" in themselves, which then strictly purposively, mould the "Outside" - matter - as their "apparatus" and use it for their expression, this biology unequivocally describes the Animate as something immanently transcendental [...]

The successive developments of the Animate are understood in the newest biology of Woltereck, as a sequence of ever new generations of "specificants" occurring in the invisible "Inside" of the life-carriers, a sequence of ever new and ever newly differentiated "species-patterns" which find actualization in the "Outside". Accordingly, the Animate is conceived as a successive unfolding of Transcendence originating mysteriously in the Invisible but actualizing itself immanently in matter. A wealth of invisible "powers" working in the "Inside" of every life-carrier is postulated with a view to interpreting the material expression of this transcendental animation in the fullest possible way. (Weber 1947: 184-185)

Weber displays here the creative element of life-organisms which he sees as the condition for freedom and self-determination. It is "supra-subjective" and it guides "the collective powers which determine the nature, form, and co-ordinated activity of

¹⁹⁰ Simmel, (1978 : 118)

individuals".¹⁹¹ By recourse to transcendence which is inherent in the life-process itself, Weber is able to set up the form-content dichotomy on the basis originally conceived by Simmel, namely its progressive, enriching and transcendent character.

Similarly, the generative potential of life (or "wealth of invisible powers" as Weber holds) has two further ramifications for Simmel. The first he terms, *more life* (*Mehr-Leben*), the second *more-than-life* (*Mehr-als-Leben*). The expanding nature of life, which incorporates, as it progresses, new elements within its periphery is conveyed by Simmel as "more life". On the other hand, the idea that life produces forms which lose their vitality and become objectified entities, or matter as Bergson presumably would say, confronting their creator, he terms as "more-than-life". For Simmel, "death is immanent in life", and this he holds is a movement of life, upwards, or as he puts it, "a stepping out of life beyond itself".¹⁹² Simmel places life as a process which moves towards two directions : upwards where it reaches self-transcendence, and downwards where it meets nothingness. Now, birth and death, that is upward and downward movement, are both acts of self-transcendence of life. Simmel characteristically, writes :

To climb beyond oneself in growth and reproduction, to sink below oneself in old age and death - these are not additions to life, but such rising up and spilling over the boundaries of the individual condition constitutes life itself. (Simmel 1971: 369)

The individual, then, as he is the agent of life, seems also to be the limit which life surpasses both by birth and death. The individual, as the reader may recall, is the carrier, the embodiment of the cosmic process of life, which transcends itself at any moment. He is *life and boundary* at the same time. The same themes recur in Simmel's essay on *The Metaphysics of Death*. There, Simmel asserts that life and death are related towards each other, the same way thesis and antithesis are related within the synthetic notion of dialectics. In an illuminating essay, titled *Georg Simmel : Philosopher of Life*, its author Vladimir Jankélévitch, epitomizes Simmel's contribution as consisting "in interiorizing the negation of life"¹⁹³ within the metaphysical notion of Life. When reading Simmel - and one has to be aware that his metaphysical writings were taking place a few years before his death - one gets the impression that these particular essays have been written by someone who had defeated the idea of death, who had already transcended it, before his organic existence had started to deteriorate.¹⁹⁴ In a certain sense, one could assert that

¹⁹¹ Weber (1947 : 186)

¹⁹² Simmel, (1971 : 369)

¹⁹³ My translation, see Simmel, (1988 : 79)

¹⁹⁴ The testimony of Count Hermann Keyserling is indicative: "Beyond Life. This has, to my

Simmel approaches Bergson once more, since for the former the individual is something to be overcome, through death which does not possess any negativity, by the movement of Life. This transcendence of Simmel's individualism, by a metaphysics (vitalism) is perhaps the culminating point of his entire philosophy. We do not know whether Simmel formulated this almost religiously optimistic metaphysical theory, because he was at the threshold of death himself. It seems though that Simmel would have anyway taken a similar direction since the seeds of vitalism and its concomitant implications, are inherent in his early work as well. The significance of Simmel's vitalism lies on the fact that it is perhaps the only metaphysical system which combines acute sociological observation with supra-logical transcendental quest, elements which it finally integrates in an authentic and ultimately uplifting philosophical theory.

V. Morality and Religion

This section, although it might appear disconnected from the previous discussion, it is in fact essential in delineating the social implications of what Bergson meant by the distinction between intelligence and instinct, as well as locating any affinities between his and Simmel's writings on religion. The esoteric character of Bergson's approach in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, should not inhibit the social researcher in abstracting useful and quite often, highly perceptive insights. The underlying thread of vitalism which permeates this work too, might have contributed to its neglect by the ranks of social scientists at that time. Our aim, although primarily focused in demonstrating that the application of vitalism in sociological issues is of the utmost importance, includes also the emphasis on the sociological significance of this work in its totality.

Bergson employs a clearly functionalist argument in his approach to both morality and religion. The profound impact of biology, which prevails in some of his previous work, has a strong influence here as well. Bergson sees society as an organism,

knowledge, been understood thus far by one man only - Georg Simmel, during the last weeks of his pilgrimage on earth, when he was in the grip of death, which he consciously awaited and lived through more than any other man I know of [...] I speak of him only ; for here it is a question of *reality - experience*, of cognition in Buddha's sense, not of a merely epistemological distinction [...] It is not only the distinction drawn by Klages, nor that drawn by Scheler, which fails to come up to what Simmel meant at that time. He meant that which can be known only by a man whose consciousness has already passed beyond the boundaries of earthly existence. Indeed, the profoundest experience of human depths takes men beyond the sphere of life". (*italics in the original*) Keyserling, 1929 : 322). In a similar fashion, the Spanish philosopher José Ortega-y-Gasset, maintains that, "Simmel, who has treated this question more acutely than anyone else, insists quite rightly on this peculiar aspect of the phenomenon of human life. The life of man, or the collection of phenomena integrated by the organic individual, possesses a transcendent dimension inasmuch as it abandons, so to speak, its own privacy and introduces itself into something alien, beyond its own limits" (Ortega-y-Gasset, 1961 : 40).

held together by the specialized functional tasks of its members. For him, the members of a community or society, "hold together like the cells of an organism", constituting a nexus of activities governed by habit.¹⁹⁵ Habit therefore, which works in a mechanical way, is no more than the active representation of concepts such as duty, or obedience. This almost unnoticed and rather unconscious orientation of the individual within the social world, lies on the automatic process of habit which, in its turn is determined by utility. This is, of course, detrimental to the vital activity of the human spirit, since it implies acceptance and an eventual conformism, according to these deeply psychologically ingrained, social expectations.

This is very briefly, Bergson's preliminary approach towards morality, which he sees as a habitual mechanism which acts in order to incorporate vital individual action, within the framework of strictly rational social activity. The reflexion of this idea, on the concepts of morality and religion is expressed as follows :

Originally, the whole of morality is custom ; and as religion forbids any departure from custom, morality is coextensive with religion.
(Bergson 1935: 102)

This is actually the point where the fundamental postulates of Bergson's philosophy enter the picture. Since morality and religion have their roots in custom which is nothing more than the perpetuation and transmission of practical and utilitarian modes of action, then consequently, they both inhere in intelligence, according to what I have already shown. Thus,

[...] religion is a defensive reaction of nature against the representation, by intelligence, of the inevitability of death. (Bergson 1935: 109)

This is a paradox for Bergson, for he detects that here we are confronted with the opposition of intelligence (religion) against intelligence (representation of death). The point is, as Bergson feels, that the logical representation of all contents of reality has had as its eventual outcome the growth of pessimism which finds its apogee in the idea of nothingness, which Bergson elsewhere refutes.¹⁹⁶ Man has suppressed the world of instinct and has elevated intelligence into an absolute. An expression of this notion would be the prevalence of science over magic, which Bergson sees as innate within the human psyche. Bergson demonstrates this in a pre-Freudian manner :

¹⁹⁵ Bergson, (1935 : 5)

¹⁹⁶ See Bergson (1911a : 287-314)

Let our attention to science relax for one instant, and magic will at once come rushing back into our civilized society, just as a desire, repressed in our waking hours, takes advantage of the lightest sleep to find satisfaction in a dream. (Bergson 1935: 146)

The analogy with religion, Bergson develops in his usual poetic fashion, when he maintains that

we represent religion [...] as the crystallization, brought about by a scientific process of cooling, of what mysticism had poured, while hot, into the soul of man. Through religion all men get [is] a little of what a few privileged souls possessed in full. (Bergson 1935: 203-204)

This open declaration of the superiority of mysticism should not surprise the reader, since we have seen that Bergson's thought, as was the case with Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Simmel and Spengler, evolved out of the general dissatisfaction with science as the realm which was synonymous to knowledge. Their anti-rationalistic attitude is reflected in Bergson's pungent assertion that "religion is to mysticism what popularization is to science".¹⁹⁷ Mysticism, one is led to suspect, that according to Bergson, would place the individual in pure duration, since it is a realm of knowledge which is detached from rational explanation. Simmel makes similar remarks about religion and mysticism in relation to modernity. He, as we have seen, believes that contemporary culture is pervaded by a widespread formlessness, an extreme relativization of contents. Religion, is for Simmel one of the predominant forms of understanding the world. However, the growing crisis of modern life, which is reflected in a widely differentiated allocation of roles and fulfillment of needs, brings respectively, a decline in the strength of traditional forms such as religion. As a result, one experiences the evolution of multiple sects which replace the functions which used to be carried out by the solid form of Christianity, since we are dealing here with the Western world. In other words, modern man feels laden with the rational character of Christianity - which ideally speaking is a misunderstood phenomenon, since the essence of Christianity is nothing but mystical - in its institutionalized form, therefore he turns to the alternative of the mysticism of Oriental religions. Simmel, although a passionate supporter of the Oriental spirit, rejects any authenticity in these "exotic, far-fetched and bizarre new doctrines" which "appear to be of no importance whatsoever".¹⁹⁸ He sees them as nothing more than a frivolous and

¹⁹⁷ Bergson, (1935 : 204)

¹⁹⁸ Simmel, (1976 : 258-259)

spasmodic reaction against the all-pervasive rationalization of every sphere of life, and above all, of religion. My refutation and distrust towards them is based on similar grounds which resonate though, Simmelian arguments. In other words, the fact that "mysticism", in the form of Eastern religions, is commodified and stripped from its socio-historical surroundings, as if one could force the Polar man to live and grow within our schizophrenic urban environment, points directly to the superficial and fallacious character of the existence of Oriental religious sects - not of course in their pure form, which is precisely the form of their ideal existence, but within the formless environment of the Western world. Additionally, their character is traumatically undermined by the fact that they cannot be neutral to the "omnipotent" and pervasive essence of money. Simmel, though, despite his criticisms towards these sects, finds the motive of the individual who turns to them, thoroughly justified :

The supra-denominational mysticism has by far the strongest appeal to these groups. For the religious soul hopes to find here direct spontaneous fulfillment, whether in standing naked and alone, as it were, before its God, without the mediation of dogma in any shape or form, or in rejecting the very idea of God as a petrification and an obstacle, and in feeling that the true religion of the soul can only be its own inmost metaphysical life not moulded by any forms of faith whatever. (Simmel 1976: 258-259)

Therefore, we are presented here with a double layer of alienation of man from religious experience : a) in the form of traditional religion which imposes form upon mysticism, and b) through the fragmentation of this dominant religious form, the discrete pieces of which, aim at restoring what has for ever been lost. Following his reverence for the pure content, the living element in individual life, Simmel summarizes his reasoning on religion and forms :

The soul can find faith only by losing it. To preserve the integrity of religious feeling, it must shake off all determined and predetermined religious form. (Simmel 1971: 391)

For Simmel then, faith or even pure religious feeling, which he feels can be found also in activities extraneous to religion, is synonymous to vitality which cannot be encompassed in form, but yet exists only *as form* . As is the case with Bergson, the purity of the individual soul is what is of the utmost importance. Simmel, in his *Sociology of Religion*, follows the same line of argumentation, although in a less philosophically inclined manner. Concentrating on Christian religion, Simmel suggests that the very individualistic essence of this doctrine, has been abused by its organized institutional form under the label of "equality before God". This is tantamount to a kind of conformism,

which reduces individual creativity to its minimum potential. The almost sacrosanct individuality of the human subject, as Simmel perceives it, is debased to a homogeneous mediocrity. This attitude echoes clearly some of the reasons of Nietzsche's aversion towards Christianity. But Simmel's individualism is neither as blunt nor as negative as Nietzsche's. In fact he places religion on a higher plane than any other social form of existence by stressing the "diversity of human ingenuity" which is immanent in Christ's teachings.¹⁹⁹ Simmel then is led to assert that the Christian concept of salvation

[...] refers to an infinite variety of religious characters, to a religious differentiation, which is not a division of labour ; for each individual may attain the totality of salvation by himself, though in a particular way. (Simmel 1959: 60)

Consequently, Simmel concludes that the religious differentiation is "not as exaggerated as social differentiations", in the sense that they represent "purer and most perfected counterparts".²⁰⁰ Again, as one can see, at the core of Simmel's exposition, lies the authentic essence of the individual in relation to the degree of its alienated representation by the particular social form ; and since the religious form allows more space for the expression of the self, which both Simmel and Bergson openly cherish, then it automatically occupies a more privileged position within their world-views.

We have seen that for Bergson, morality resides in the notion of habit. However, it seems that in this particular issue Simmel is more Bergsonian than Bergson himself. Although the German sociologist identifies custom as one of the primordial forms of social life, being inextricably linked with morality, he sees the latter as a dynamic form. In other words, the moral consciousness proceeds with the same evolutionary manner, as the religious or even the social consciousness. This is a notion which is not present in Bergson. Rather than being a logico-synthetic process, moral consciousness is a dynamic one which resembles the organic, or even the individual psychological evolution.

This exposition of both thinkers' attitudes on religion brings us to the end of this re-examination of vitalism. The fundamental similarities between Simmel and Bergson, acquire under their study of religion, a more palpable expression. For Bergson, religion would represent the rationalization of the self, and it is largely the work of intelligence. Mysticism on the other hand, would place the individual in pure duration, and it is actually lived through intuition. Simmel is not far from similar conclusions. He says that religion is a form, which during the cultural epoch of modernity, loses gradually its

¹⁹⁹ Simmel, (1959 : 60)

²⁰⁰ Simmel, (1959 : 62)

power to subsume within its periphery the diverse human personality. He, as Bergson does, sees in mysticism the pure realization of the religious feeling, which unfettered from any form, reaches for its satisfaction. He nonetheless repudiates the formal representations of mysticism, which he sees as suffering from the same problems as Christian religion in its organized form.

VI. Conclusion

The general harmony between Bergson and Simmel has been obvious through this analysis, especially via the latter's metaphysical writings. However, there is one substantial difference, the implications of which are evident in both thinkers' attitude towards relativism. Thus, whereas for Bergson, moving vitality is an absolute entity, and reality is a distorted version of it, because of the function of intelligence which cannot avoid operating within relativities, for Simmel, it seems, and this is more implicit than explicit, that because life is in constant motion it can be nothing but relative. Movement, for Simmel, does not refute relativism, but it rather substantiates it.

The crucial point, is that Simmel transferred Bergson's notions from the biological to the social realm ; and despite shortcomings in his theory, one cannot deny that for such an overambitious aim, Simmel's vitalism exhibits some postulates of remarkable coherence and plausibility. If we want to represent schematically his relation to Bergson and Nietzsche, we can do so if we imagine a vertical line. If we ascribe to this line a movement which is directed towards its two antithetical poles, then one can place at the top, Bergson's *élan vital* (the upward movement capable of surpassing even death), at the bottom, Nietzsche's eternal recurrence (the downward nihilistic movement of life which leads to eternal circles), while in the middle, equi-distant between the two extremes, one would find Simmel's transcendence of life, which through the notions of "more-life", and "more-than-life", would extend indefinitely towards both directions. This is so, because Simmel does not embrace the dogmatic optimism of Bergson, and is not drawn in the abyss of the catastrophic individualism of Nietzsche. His theory reflects the perpetual oscillation between the two opposites, which is "tragic" in essence, since its extreme points move away from any objective reconciliation.

Going back to Simmel's bitterness regarding the inferior status which had been ascribed to him in relation to Bergson, I can only add one thing : that despite the fact that

Simmel has been excessively inspired by the philosophy of Bergson, his attempt to introduce vitalism in the social life *per se* , and his success in relating it to concrete sociological phenomena, is such a significant intellectual effort, that the gap between the two can be said to have been dramatically decreased. One should be very skeptical as to Weingartner's emphatic remark, that Simmel's philosophy lacks "the stamp of greatness".²⁰¹ Simmel's philosophy deserves much more than it has received so far, precisely because it attempted to bridge in the most radical but also the most perceptive way, two antithetical realms whose reconciliation had previously just been glimpsed but never quite been realized.

²⁰¹ Weingartner, (1960 : 188-189)

Chapter 5 : Simmel and Spengler : Tragedy and Destiny in Modern Culture and Civilization

I. Introduction

The implications of vitalism for the assessment and critique of modern culture and civilization have been far-reaching and enduring, despite the fact that they remain largely ignored by more recent critics of modernity. The incorporation of vitalistic ideas into a sociological framework is, as I have tried to argue in the previous chapter, largely due to Simmel. The transition from the strictly biological and philosophical definition of vitalism (Bergson), via an epistemological but fundamentally historicist formulation (Dilthey), has led to the sociological vitalism of certain classical thinkers (Simmel, Scheler, Mannheim) and to its hybrid offspring of neo-vitalism (Maffesoli). However, if Simmel was the instigator of a re-appraisal of vitalism for a theory of culture, Oswald Spengler was certainly, the executor of such a scheme.

To understand and evaluate the vitalistic philosophy and its close links to the rapid socio-political transitions in Germany at the turn of the century and up to the aftermath of WWI, one needs to take into account *The Decline of the West*, Spengler's *magnum opus*. Its great influence at that time, was perhaps due to the fact that it captured accurately a transitional point in the development of German society and thought. Spengler integrated this tradition within a grand holistic framework and presented it as a catalytic moment in history and as a *raison d'etre* for the German national consciousness. Spengler's retreat into virtual oblivion today, seems to be due to the fact that he was accused of academic *dilettantism* - especially in historiography and philosophy of history - , and because his "grand theory" was interpreted as being proto-fascist.

Notwithstanding his tarnished image it may be useful to look at Spengler's work from a new angle, because the existing studies of his thought offer an incomplete picture. What calls for a re-evaluation is the relevance of his writings for an understanding of modern society, and the fact that he - being the last great vitalist thinker (following Nietzsche and Simmel) - marks the culmination and end of a philosophically based critique of Western industrial society.

Ostensibly a book on the philosophy of history, *The Decline of the West* offers a meta-critique of History and a radical reformulation of historical discourse that assimilates

it to myth rather than the standard approach of the humanities or social sciences. At first glance, the organization of this ambitious work takes the form of a burlesque parade of biological, anthropological, psychological, social, political, economic, philosophical and metaphysical insights : loose internal links between socio-historical events, sweeping analogies blended through the author's anti-bourgeois morality, and highly speculative judgements provide the basis for criticisms of his work. Yet, the influence he exerted transcends the limits imposed by the conventions of academia and has touched writers as diverse as Herman Hesse and Ludwig Wittgenstein. *The Decline of the West* does not conform to the standards of purely academic discourse (careful substantiation of data, abstinence from speculative judgements, moderate appraisals of results etc.) and the fact that it violated these conventions proved costly for a proper reading of the book.²⁰²

The commentaries of the book, and consequently of Spengler's thought in general, focus on the so-called uneven nature of the work. Spengler's weakness as an academic resides on the plethoric and often, disjointed structure of some of his chapters where the historical detail seems to overshadow the central thesis. His imagination and ingeniousness - that are acknowledged through his largely philosophical chapters - legitimise him as a charismatic sage, a prophet that sensed the forthcoming changes (WWII, high urbanization, ecological disasters etc) but whose unscientific attitude prevented the whole venture from having a profound impact. These are the arguments by most commentators on Spengler and upon which his reception has been based. It is true that there is a relative weakness in those parts that are presented as illustration of his central argument on the cyclic process of cultures. This fragility is accentuated by the turgid manner with which Spengler establishes his connections. However, Spengler's thought manifests itself rigorously in those parts of the book where he engages himself with the argument without resorting to the testimony of historical events. My concern with his thought will be based primarily on *The Decline of the West* (including its *resumé* offered by Spengler ten years later in *Man and Technics*) and my reading of it will proceed along two lines : that of epistemology and that of cultural critique. Before outlining the stages of this appraisal, I ought to place Spengler within relevant debates in the humanities. For this purpose I shall be using key thinkers that have commented on various aspects of Spengler's thought.

The historical leitmotif of the era within which Spengler was writing need not be emphasized here since it has been outlined by H.Stuart Hughes. He traces the birth of

²⁰² Simmel's policy of not referencing his sources (in terms of notes and authors) has won him similar accusations. An additional factor that resembles Spengler's venture is the fact that Simmel dealt with a variety of issues that were regarded as unworthy of academic research. Both writers' policy - or rather attitude-towards-life - to concentrate on the detail and extract from it a cosmic meaning was not palatable to the academic community of the era.

Spengler's thought, historically, to the aristocratic, politically uncertain and militarist climate around the early 1910s in Germany ; intellectually, he places Spengler's thought as bearing the marks of the massive novelties that Nietzsche had introduced a few decades earlier, as well as the influence of Bergson, Pareto, Freud and Sorel.²⁰³ Regarding his own assessment of Spengler, Hughes committs himself to the errors that have underlined most interpretations ; for him, Spengler as an epistemologist is flawed since he adheres to a "naive positivism" to "contradictions" and "determinist assumptions".²⁰⁴ By contrast, Spengler as a diagnostician of a society in crisis that undergoes severe decay, is presented as a man of "rare gifts of insight" that captured accurately the dominant cultural mood of the time.²⁰⁵ It is as if one could isolate these two facets of Spengler's thought without noticing that there are closely related and that this insightful cultural critique is a necessary consequence of his epistemological thesis.

Georg Lukács has launched a polemical attack on Spengler mainly from a rationalist - Marxist perspective. In outlining his history of vitalism-irrationalism in modern thought, Lukács presents Spengler's doctrine as the continuation and simplification²⁰⁶ of theories laid out first by Dilthey and, most importantly, Simmel. This thesis strikes us as false since - despite the affinities - Spengler's theory is not simply a perversion of previous vitalistic and relativistic theories. It is perhaps more accurate to assert that he extended and synthesized previous theoretic approaches covering the whole gamut of the philosophy that developed as a reaction to rationalism and to the type of political theory of Rousseau or Marx. Despite the dogmatic line of thought in *The Destruction of Reason*,²⁰⁷ Lukács provides some acute observations (i.e the category of analogy in relation to irrationalism) and he establishes plausibly the link between Spengler's philosophy of history and the transformation of modern culture.

An interesting but split interpretation comes from Theodor Adorno who seems to reject the methodology of Spengler on the grounds that it is "positivist", it eliminates causality, and it resorts to fatalism.²⁰⁸ What guides Spengler's metaphysics is the

²⁰³ Hughes (1952 : 14-26)

²⁰⁴ Hughes (1974 : 377)

²⁰⁵ Ibid. : 378

²⁰⁶ Lukács (1980 : 464)

²⁰⁷ As a history of philosophical ideas the book is ingenious and it is the most complete presentation of irrationalism available; as a critique of that movement from the perspective of historical materialism it is biased and flawed. Unfortunately the preponderance of the second tendency burdens the discussion of Spengler as well.

²⁰⁸ Adorno (1967 : 63)

"elimination of the category of potentiality" and its replacement by Destiny.²⁰⁹ Adorno though, is sympathetic towards Spengler's analysis of modern-bourgeois culture. Spengler's attack on the bourgeoisie and its offsprings such as money, technology and the press anticipates many of the premises of Adorno's cultural writings. For example, in relation to the power of the press and individual freedom, Spengler maintains that the newspaper is used as an opiate for the masses and gives them the illusion of freedom. Adorno's sympathy for this assertion is evident in his writings on both the press and the media and it, generally, points to the idea of a "cultural conspiracy" under capitalism that he and most of the members of the Frankfurt School seem to adhere to. In this respect it strikes us as a paradox that Adorno objects to the idea of Destiny in *The Decline of the West*, since his description of contemporary culture is permeated by a fatalistic tone especially through the idea of a subordination of a "group of men by another"²¹⁰; in Adorno this tendency is apparent in the dismal portrayals of culture and industry in the West.

Although a work on history, *The Decline of the West* gained very little support among historians. Its idiosyncratic interpretation of history through a naturalistic angle appeared as reductionistic despite the fact that in French philosophy of history there had been hints of similar links between history and nature or biology in the thought of Ravaissou and Bergson. A typical example of the negative reception of the book is given by R.G. Collingwood who discards Spengler's argument on the basis of its morphological method, its excessive relativism, its biologicistic grounding and its dualistic nature, among others.²¹¹ For him, the whole argument is reduced to a kind of naturalistic fatalism that eliminates from men the category of action.

Since the purpose of this chapter is to explore the theoretical similarities between Simmel and Spengler in order to re-appraise some of these views, I ought to make some reference to the actual historical relationship between the two scholars. The first volume of *The Decline of the West* was published in 1917 only one year before Simmel's death. Chronologically, the limits are too short to have been able to allow communication and feedback between them. Spengler does not refer to Simmel at all in either volumes of the work despite the fact that he must have been influenced by the latter's writings. However, through some correspondance between Spengler and various scholars we know that Simmel had not only read the book but that he had also given an extremely favourable review in written form. There are specifically, two references to Simmel in these letters.

²⁰⁹ Ibid. : 67

²¹⁰ ibid. : 70

²¹¹ Collingwood (1946 : 182)

The first comes from Professor George Misch in a letter to Spengler where the former writes that he encountered the book for the first time "at Georg Simmel's".²¹² But more importantly, Spengler himself in a letter to Augustus Albers in 1919, writes that among the reviews of the book that he had sent him the only worthy one was "a comment by Simmel, that it [The Decline of the West] is the most important philosophy of history since Hegel".²¹³ Bearing in mind this comment, the comparison between the two philosophers is seen now through a different light.

The following discussion is organized along two main lines : that of epistemology and that of theory of culture. This is mainly for purposes of clarity rather than strict thematic demarcation. The section on epistemology will introduce the reader to the thought of Spengler through vitalism and relativism. For example, I shall be discussing Spengler's conception of historical understanding along with the morphological methodology that he introduces. Therefore, issues of (cultural) relativism will be addressed as consequences of vitalism and irrationalism along with the dualistic character of the latter. Finally, I shall refer to Spengler's ideas on Nature-knowledge that reflect the same relativistic spirit. Simmel's thought will be constantly brought into the picture by means of comparison and contrast.

In the second and more detailed section on culture, Simmel occupies a more central position. The axes of the analysis will be the notions of "tragedy" and "destiny" which correspond respectively to Simmel's and Spengler's prevalent ideas in their theories of culture. Tönnies' dualistic sociology of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* will also be referred to since Spengler's, more than Simmel's, scheme is based on it. Again, the impact of relativism for the formulation of the study of culture will be assessed. The fundamental opposition between Culture and Civilization will be placed within a general historical context and Simmel's similar notions will be viewed from afresh. Consequently, the city as the socio-historical locale that embodies contradictions and conflicts is an integral part of the discussion which will conclude with the impact of vitalism (will-to-power, becoming, Caesarism, war etc) for a cultural critique of modernity.

A reconsideration of all these issues aims at demonstrating the far-reaching influence of the concept of "Life" for the humanities, social sciences and philosophy, not only in the sociology of knowledge of Scheler and Mannheim, but also for any attempt to comprehend the current state of Western civilization. Its different manifestations testify to its wide impact. The understanding of modernity that contemporary sociology seeks on the basis of Tönnies, Simmel, Weber or Mannheim, rests on the vitalist current that

²¹² Spengler (1966 : 67)

²¹³ Ibid. : 81

prevailed during that tumultuous epoch. Spengler's thought expresses thoroughly the spirit of that epoch and as I shall try to demonstrate it is sociologically relevant for a reading of our times.

II. Epistemology, *Lebensphilosophie* and Cultural Relativism

The encyclopaedic character of *The Decline of the West* and Spengler's scant references to his contemporaries make the task of tracing the roots of his thought somewhat nebulous. However, having looked at the central argument it seems that Spengler's philosophy of history owes much to four intellectual traditions although these are by no means absolute ; they rather express the spirit within which Spengler wrote and despite the fact that none of them belongs to a philosophy of history they nonetheless moulded his thought from its very foundations. These ideas are : Goethe's naturalism, Nietzsche's will-to-power, Simmel's analogical sociology and Bergson's vitalistic and dualistic philosophy. For example, Goethe's thought is evident in the organic and living essence of history and nature that Spengler envisages, Nietzsche's power-doctrine guides his longing for the charismatic leader, Simmel's sociological morphology manifests itself in the notion of types but also in relation to observations on modernization and urbanization, while although Bergson's *élan vital* has been dropped, his vitalistic dualisms display in Spengler all their internal tension. There are peripheral theoretical positions that are utilized by Spengler and are to be found in the thought of Heraclitus, Darwin, Marx, Meyer, Dilthey, Weber, Tönnies but again, the core of his argument is formulated by the relativistic-vitalistic nature of the four aforementioned thinkers. The following sections examine precisely this relationship and the essence of Spengler's argument.

a) The Problem of History :

The evolution of contemporary philosophy of history was prior to, but from a certain point parallel to the development of sociology. The legacy of German Idealism from Fichte and Schelling to Hegel presented the foundations for the building of a new conception of history removed from the transcendental discourse of Hegel. The reactionary character of the new philosophy of history passed through various stages before being integrated as social critique in the thought of Spengler. In an outline of the philosophical ideas that prevailed in Germany between 1831 and 1933, Herbert Schnädelbach presents the different forms of "historicism" that have marked the development of history and social science,²¹⁴ and the multiplicity of the philosophies of

²¹⁴ Schnädelbach (1984 : 35-36)

history that synthesized them and presented them either as historical formalism (Rickert, Windelband), or as historical hermeneutics (Dilthey, Simmel) and historical vitalism (Spengler). The two latter approaches bear deeply the marks of Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's anti-historicism and irrationalism. It is within this quasi-scientific spirit that Spengler's philosophy of history came about. Unsurprisingly, Spengler continues to write according to Nietzschean patterns where epistemology and the description of the modern civilization merge. His meditation on history both as *science* and as *cultural phenomenon* present the interpreter who attempts to analyze his theory on purely epistemological grounds with enormous difficulties. These are the same difficulties that are presented in the thought of Nietzsche and Simmel who, more than any other scholar, translated epistemology into *a way of life* that was consonant both with its metaphysical theoretic premises and with its practical and timely consequences of an understanding of society. It is thus no accident that all three thinkers (and perhaps Bergson as well) associated vitalism with the cultural transition of the West from the 1850s to the 1930s where the rupture between Culture and Civilization affected all areas of thought from art to the social sciences and from philosophy to physics. The first step in demonstrating the interdependence of vitalism, irrationalism and relativism with an analysis of the rapid structural changes brought about by economy and technology in modern society, is to look at Spengler's radical departure from contemporary historiography or better, his radical return to a kind of historiography supposedly tainted with positivism and naturalism.

The affinities between Simmel and Spengler in the philosophy of history are minimal. Simmel as I have demonstrated earlier on, is preoccupied with altogether different problems. He continues the discourse set out by Dilthey on the hermeneutics of history and the typological construction of methodical tools for interpretive understanding. However, it is important to note that two fundamental ideas in his philosophy of history require special attention : his emphasis on forms and his underlying vitalism. These become with Spengler indispensable elements of a new world-view.

This new world-view treats entities and concepts according to epistemological dualisms that have been introduced since the dawn of Western philosophy but have been intensified since the post-romantic philosophy of Nietzsche. This contemporary emphasis on polar opposites that struggle with each other perpetually, can be attributed to the socio-political fermentation of the times - due to modernization and political upheavals - and it provided the right means for an understanding of such a radical transformation of society. It sprang from an opposition to numerous concepts the most important of which are reason, intellect, science, technology, causality, form, the city, money and similar ones, that the adherents to vitalism saw as being intrinsic to this new but wholly alien way of

life.

Spengler states his (or better, the world's) dualistic pattern from the first pages of *The Decline of the West*. The archetypal picture of the world is constructed on the basis of a dualism as old as the first organism itself : Life and Death. The outcome of human action that is objectified and remains as a property of culture is understood through either "mathematical law" that comprehends the "dead forms" of human experience, or through "analogy" that captures the "living forms".²¹⁵ Since History is concerned with the living spirit it proceeds analogically, comparatively and by constructing typological categories. It deals with "things-becoming" not "things-become", with "organic" essences rather than "mechanical" functions, in its attempt to grasp the "content" of the world through "symbol", as opposed to the discovery of "law" and the reduction of the world's meaning into a "formula" or "system".²¹⁶ The issue therefore of *statics* versus *dynamics* is transposed to historiography proper where the historian by means of analogy will be able to look at "world-history as a picture of endless formations and transformations, of the marvellous waxing and waning of organic forms".²¹⁷ This is a sort of formalism that is called now "morphology". Spengler calls this novel approach "physiognomic" - which is, in fact, Goethe's naturalism applied to the human sciences - in contrast to the "systematic" method that belongs to the realm of nomological natural science. Following another set of dualisms, Spengler distinguishes these *techniques* as follows :

The Morphology of the mechanical and the extended, a science which discovers and orders nature-laws and causal relations, is called Systematic. The Morphology of the organic, of history and life and all that bears the sign of direction and destiny, is called Physiognomic. (Spengler 1926: 100)

The implications which arise from this conceptual demarcation for a methodical understanding of the world are manifold. Firstly, this dualism introduces the elements of metaphysical vitalism ("destiny") and cultural relativism ("organic", "direction"), secondly, through the notion of "destiny" it points to vitalistic fatalism and agnosticism and thirdly, it reduces the whole epistemological discourse to the more concrete dualism of "truth" and "fact". Matter and Life, in Bergsonian terms, are the antithetical axes that generate not only the tension of opposites in the purely metaphysical sense, but also their

²¹⁵ Spengler (1926 : 4)

²¹⁶ Ibid.: 6 Characteristically, Spengler views History with its cultures as similar to "the living Nature of Goethe, and not to the dead Nature of Newton". (ibid. : 21)

²¹⁷ Ibid. : 21-22. Obviously, even at this early stage, one can sense the relevance of Simmel's morphological conception of society, the forms of which are in a permanent state of becoming, their rise and demise ultimately settled by Life.

practical conflict in the context of the politics of the social world (religion versus mysticism, democracy versus Caesarism etc.). The *a priori* principle for the understanding of (natural) matter and consequently (but paradoxically, according to Spengler) of society or history *as* matter, is causal knowledge. It proceeds by reducing all explanation to relationships of cause and effect and by means of laws - which can be no other than causal - constructs "truths" that on the basis of this determinism "follow *from* one another".²¹⁸ These "truths" are employed through rational "systematic criticism" in order to dominate Being and present a scientifically based world-view on the premises of a scientifically based nature-view ; the theoretical and practical tools for such knowledge being "hypothesis" and "technique".²¹⁹ Spengler contrasts this set of principles with another set which however stems from the same idea such as the one he criticizes : a knowledge of history on the basis of a knowledge of nature. However, Spengler has in mind here the mystical, agnostic and anthropomorphic naturalism of Goethe, rather than a causally determined and intellectualized nature. So, whereas the rationalist, materialist or idealist starts from a *given* causality, the vitalist is *guided* and *directed* by Destiny. Within Destiny and accordingly within History-as-destiny, we are confronted with the unique living experience of the world of "facts", facts that defy causal understanding and which simply "follow one another"²²⁰ irreducible to mechanical explanation in terms of functions, but *comparable* in structure through "analogy". In short, Spengler condenses the ultimate ontological schism in man's (waking) consciousness in the form of Life-claiming but unquenched will-to-power which is subordinate to the intellect. In the conscious self, History and Nature settle the conditions for the final but already decided struggle : "life" against "death" or "ever-becoming time" against "ever-become space".²²¹ Hereupon lies Spengler's reverence for "aimlessness" as opposed to teleology and progress. Taking a sample from the multiplicity of histories, Spengler proposes the following historiographic approach :

A history of States is physiognomic and not systematic. Its business is not to show how "humanity" advances to the conquest of its eternal rights, to freedom and equality, to the evolving of a super-wise and

²¹⁸ Ibid. : 158

²¹⁹ *ibid.* : 154. On the question of technics, Spengler presents its genesis, development, elaboration and decline in *Man and Technics* . I shall come back to this theme later on in this chapter in my discussion of vitalism and modernity and the role of technology.

²²⁰ *ibid.* : 158

²²¹ *ibid.*: 159. Hence Spengler's sympathy for the Christian-Orthodox mysticism of the Russians - presumably in its Dostoevskian form - that appears covertly to reinforce this battle in the form of the "physiognomic" contemplative "soul of the eternal child" against the systematic "reason of an eternal greybeard" (*ibid.*) .

super-just State, but to describe the political units that really exist in the fact-world, how they grow and flourish and fade, and how they are really nothing but actually life "in form". (Spengler 1928: 370)²²²

This quote encapsulates Spengler's analogical philosophy of history along with its hints of fatalism and relativism. Both notions bring us faced with a brand new conception of history that utilizes archaic forms of discourse (positivism, biologism) by making them relevant to a timely assessment of present man in concrete relation to his past and future. This relationship is no other than that of Fate and Destiny. Birth, development and the inevitable decline of forms and of the cultures within which they arise, is the fundamental and indisputable course of Life (biological and social) and this notion re-introduces Spengler's belief that a similarity in their "inner structure"²²³ is the only thing one has to master in order to capture the living spirit behind forms. This is the only method, indeed the only world-view that allows us to transcend the hermetically sealed life-world of alien cultures and the equally esoteric life-experience of its peoples (This is the crucial point where Spengler is faced with the consequences of his own initial argument that set him up

²²² Again, at this early stage I ought to bring Simmel into the picture. His relevance pertains to the method proposed by Spengler with its purely descriptive and analogical aim. This physiognomic (or morphological, or analogical or even formal) type of interpretation of socio-historical phenomena echoes Simmel's writings on the sociology of forms and remains consistent throughout his *oeuvre*. However it is part of a long tradition of the Germanic academic discourse that sees systematic thought as being obstructive (or even utopian) in interpreting the social world. Looking at Simmel one has to note, apart from the striking phraseological resemblance with Spengler, that these themes despite being articulated "sociologically" they connote wider epistemological arguments. For example, Simmel argues that in relation to interpretation and understanding "[...] it is out of the question to attempt anything more than to begin and to point out the direction of an infinitely long path ; and any systematically final completeness would be at least, self-deception. An individual can attain completeness [...] only in the subjective sense, by reporting everything he has succeeded in observing" (Simmel in Coser, 1965 : 53). In dealing with his own method, in this quote, Simmel places sociological explanation within a general background of descriptive sociology. Indeed, as I have demonstrated earlier on, interpretation and understanding according to Simmel imply descriptive procedures and insights. This is how Simmel saw the limitations of interpretation as a systematic method - a radical departure from Weber's *Verstehen*. Description through analogy seem to be for Simmel the ultimate points for sociological explanation. Interestingly enough other thinkers seem to share Simmel's and Spengler's views on this matter. In Ludwig Wittgenstein one reads : "In describing reality I describe what I come upon men. Similarly, sociology must describe our conduct and our valuations just like those of the Negroes. **It can only report what occurs** . But the proposition, **"such-and-such means progress" must never occur in a sociologist's description** ".([Emphasis added] Wittgenstein in Bloor, 1983 : 82). It seems that Wittgenstein here employs description as the main framework within all sociological inquiry should be enclosed. The main justification is that in describing social reality, nomological criteria about progress cannot be substantially grounded. This observation on descriptive sociology stems from two factors that point to Spenglerian residues in Wittgenstein's thought : a) through the statement "it can only report what occurs" we derive an emphasis on "facts" or the "fact-world", in Spengler's terminology, that can only be grasped through description and analogy, and b) the negation of the authentication of any proposition on the grounds that it makes claims to teleology - and specifically, progress - through the expression "such-and-such means progress" is reminiscent of the Spenglerian rejection of aetiological or causal explanation. This is just a hint to less apparent links between Spengler and Wittgenstein but its importance lies on the fact that the very nature of a descriptive, analogical and physiognomic observation of society manifests itself - although in complex form - first, in the thought of Simmel.

²²³ Spengler (1926 : 112)

against the cultural relativism he fully embraced). Before I address the issue of cultural relativism and despite the fact that I shall concentrate later in much detail on the transitional period that starts from the vitality of Culture and signals its necrosis *as* Civilization, it seems necessary to present this transformation in the way Spengler contemplated it. In poetic language he presents the *organic* and *earth-bound* image of Culture as opposed to the *mechanical* and *reified* final phase, that of Civilization as follows:

A Culture is born in the moment when a great soul awakens out of the proto-spirituality (*dem urseelenhaften Zustande*) of ever-childish humanity, and detaches itself, a form from the formless, a bounded and mortal thing from the boundless and enduring. It blooms on the soil of an exactly-definable landscape, to which plant-wise it remains bound. It dies when this soul has actualized the full sum of its possibilities in the shape of peoples, languages, dogmas, arts, states, sciences, and reverts into the proto-soul. But its living existence, that sequence of great epochs which define and display the stages of fulfillment, is an inner passionate struggle to maintain the Idea against the powers of Chaos [. . .] The aim once attained - the idea, the entire content of inner possibilities, fulfilled and made externally actual - the Culture suddenly hardens, it mortifies, its blood congeals, its force breaks down, and it becomes *Civilization* [...] (Spengler 1926: 106)

With this contrast between Culture and Civilization, Spengler disguises his vitalistic doctrine as one of philosophy of history. In his penchant for metaphor one can see how dominant themes in German thought were incorporated into a new framework. The rise of Culture, its presentation *as* form out of the spiritual, pure, mystic and chaotic Unknown, echoes the main tenets of the vitalistic philosophies of Dilthey (with its proto-forms and emphasis on race- and earth-bound relationship of Culture) and Simmel (the birth of form out of formlessness, life *as* form, form *as* having exhausted its potential therefore being superseded - or died, according to Spengler). This glorification of agnosticism belongs undoubtedly to Goethe. Its biologicistic consequences are evident in the organic depiction of Culture. For Spengler, "Culture" goes through the same stages of development as man does : its course from its birth onwards follows "childhood", "youth", "manhood" and "old age"²²⁴ where its energy diminishes, its creative resources become empty and that's where it fulfills its Destiny and dies. Spengler draws on several cases from World-history - which we obviously have to ignore in the present study - in order to show that this course of events occurs in every Culture irrespective of time and space. In other words, peoples and races along with their creative potential and its actualization pass through the pre-cultural, cultural and civilizational but ultimate stage. For Spengler, not only these stages are definite but what is also pre-ordered is the

²²⁴ Ibid. : 107

chronological life-span of such a period. But what are the implications of this cyclic and methodologically physiognomic picture of History for the cultural relativism that Spengler so ardently propagates ? And assuming that Spengler's description is correct how does this place the modern western spectator of events within world-history ? How does Spengler's evaluation of modern civilization fit within his own epistemology as well as with the consistent climate of Fate and Destiny that characterizes other classical critics of modernity ? These are some of the questions which I shall try to bring into clearer focus through the following sections in order to clarify - within the context of classical social thought - the interconnectedness of relativism and vitalism and their significance for a proper understanding of contemporary life. Simmel and Spengler - despite some substantial differences in their world-views - emerge as the most astute diagnosticians of the (incurable) disease that afflicts the Western World. And any interpretation of their thought that treats epistemology and cultural critique as separate paths, must be suspect in its understanding of either.

b) Cultural Relativism :

The negation of a progressive and culturally cumulative interpretation of History has been put forward by Spengler as a reaction to the mechanistic, positivistic and teleological conception of society's progress (e.g. Comte's). Maintaining that primitive worlds are "grown-up", "self-complete"²²⁵ and systematic, Spengler subverted the hierarchical structure of human society that early functionalistic social science had put forward. Against "progress", he resorted to Goethe's ideas about metamorphosis and transformation²²⁶ as the essential ingredients of Nature, and these ideas having been philosophically and sociologically filtered through the vitalism of Nietzsche and Simmel, were utilized by Spengler and presented as "things-becoming". By replacing "progress" with "change" Spengler had confronted relativism, not as a problem, but as the only legitimate world-view. (This question of legitimacy, that has preoccupied critics of Spengler's philosophy, and refers to the validity of his theory, will be looked at as the argument progresses).

For Spengler there is no History as such, in the same way as there is no Mankind as such. Despite the fact that this is not a new assertion, having been articulated in various forms within the discourse of historical relativism, it is with Spengler that it is given a new outlook and a more coherent and bold formulation. Whereas previous neo-Kantian philosophies of history (e.g. Dilthey and Simmel), acknowledged the perspectivism of historical research, they seemed to be reluctant to carry their relativistic stand to its

²²⁵ Spengler (1928 : 274)

²²⁶ Spengler (1926 : 97)

extreme (This is particularly true of Simmel's historical relativism). Spengler proceeds by looking at the actual consequences of relativism. The phantom of universality that had casted its spell over the West and had equated it with the World-as-such is thoroughly shattered. The "*one* linear history" is replaced with "the drama of *a number* of mighty Cultures". Each culture is a form-world of its own, "stamping its material, its mankind, in *its own image*".²²⁷ Consequently, the products (whether art-forms or sciences) of Cultures are unique in their existence, duration and role within each Culture. Even the most rigorous of sciences, mathematics and physics are subject to this relativization of forms and world-pictures.²²⁸ Applying his relativism to natural science Spengler reduced these categories of knowledge to phenomena that belong exclusively to the West-European-American (Faustian) Civilization. It is thus no coincidence that Spengler builds his argument by relativizing the concept of number and mathematics only in the second chapter of *The Decline of the West* . Number is stripped from its objective status by being designated as a category that resembles myth²²⁹ and accordingly is conceived and articulated in relation to the Culture²³⁰ within which it *happens* to appear. From this, we move to the relativization of mathematics, and the cornerstone of Western natural science, causality, to which Spengler juxtaposes Destiny. Similarly, all other realms of life fail to remain immune to cultural relativism. Art, for example, and its own cornerstone, music, is seen as being relative to the Soul²³¹ that has created it and *lived* it. The consequences of this kind of reasoning are not far to seek. Entering the domain of law and morality we embrace moral relativism, an area that even modern relativists are trying to avoid. Law is made subjective and relative being dependant on "political and economic interests" of an oligarchy that operates "in the name of generality".²³² Within the tradition of Montaigne and Nietzsche, Spengler negates transcendent moral values since "there are as many morales as there are Cultures" and none of these can ever be termed the "general morale of humanity".²³³ It is on these grounds, as we shall see at a later stage, that Spengler attacks Western Imperialism through moral relativism, seeing it as being closely linked with the destiny that awaits the West. This destiny is epitomized by the socio-historical locale of

²²⁷ Ibid.: 21

²²⁸ *ibid.*

²²⁹ *ibid.* : 57

²³⁰ *ibid.* : 59

²³¹ *ibid.*: 228

²³² Spengler (1928 : 64)

²³³ Spengler (1926 : 345)

the City²³⁴ which again Spengler turns into the only repository of ideas and forms that are regarded as universal history.

But beyond these specific assumptions that outline Spengler's cultural relativism lie more general conjectures that account for the incommensurability between Cultures. Firstly, one has to look at the very limits to which Spengler extends his thought. In trying to locate the proto-spirituality of Cultures and the mysterious moment of birth of its forms, Spengler, in an obscure but appropriate passage, refers to the "prime symbol" as the category of potentiality in the course of a Culture :

It actualizes for every high Culture the possibility of form upon which that Culture's existence rests and it does so of deep necessity. All fundamental words [. . .] are emblems, obligatory and determined by destiny, that out of the infinite abundance of world-possibilities evoke in the name of the individual Culture those possibilities that alone are significant and therefore necessary for it [. . .] The *choice of prime symbol* in the moment of the Culture-soul's awakening into self-consciousness[. . .] decides all. (Spengler 1926: 179-180)

To read this as a comment on accidentality - through the combination of words such as "destiny" or "choice" - is I think to misjudge Spengler's quest for epistemological foundationalism. In negating all established foundationalist concepts as relative, Spengler makes a Nietzschean turn and resorts to the biologicistic explanation that has so well served him in the formulation of his theory and that remains faithful to the vitalist tradition. What is important in the previous quotation is the hint to the fact that significance and necessity are factors that are immanent with "the choice of the prime symbol" as a Culture is born out of the womb of oblivion and darkness. Indeed the criterion of Culture as "life in form", seems to lie in the old debate between Darwinians and Neo-Lamarckians. Here Causality faces Will and passivity faces domination. The "destiny that is imposed on one" clashes with the "destiny that is identical with oneself".²³⁵ Necessity and significance *are* epiphenomena of the will-to-power. Here, the man *thrown* into the world confronts *his* destiny and becomes *free* - in Spinoza's sense - only if he accepts one incontrovertible but noble and simple fact :

There are no "men-in-themselves" such as the philosophers talk about, but only men of a time, of a locality, of a race, of a personal cast, who contend in battle with a *given* world and win through or

²³⁴ Spengler (1928 : 95) The maxim "World history is city history" is one of the most sharp arguments in Spengler's relativization of history. Looking at the history of art, for example, we only encounter the creations of city-souls with their grand-sculpture, grand-painting, or with their exclusively city-based art-forms like cinema. But nowhere in established history we encounter the Soul of the countryside with all its art-forms. Countryside and Art are for the city-dweller mutually exclusive categories.

²³⁵ Spengler, (1932 : 27)

fail, while the universe around them moves slowly on with a godlike unconcern. This battle *is* life - life, indeed, in the Nietzschean sense, a grim, pitiless, no-quarter battle of the Will-to-Power. (Spengler 1932: 15-16)

This is cultural relativism in its archetypal connection to *lebensphilosophie*. This Will-to-Power, in its purity, is one of "organic growth" and not of "souless mechanization"; it has taken the latter form only through the advent of an exclusively economical and industrial way of life summed up by capitalism and socialism.²³⁶ It is here where metaphysics, epistemology and any study of man mingle in order to unravel what is for Spengler the basis of all knowledge. His references to Nietzsche are a natural consequence of his attempt to return the most fully-developed vitalistic philosophy, back to its intellectual patron. It is in Nietzsche where the seeds for a biologically oriented philosophy of existence were planted and those seeds Spengler fully cultivated. By the same token cultural relativism is presented as the world-form of Life. Looking back at Nietzsche we read :

There exists neither "spirit", nor reason, nor thinking, nor consciousness, nor soul, nor will, nor truth : all are fictions²³⁷ that are of no use. There is no question of "subject and object", but of a particular species of animal, that can prosper only through a certain relative rightness ; above all, regularity of its perceptions (so that it can accumulate experience) -

Knowledge works as a tool of power. Hence it is plain that it increases with every increase of power -

The meaning of "knowledge" : here, as in the case of "good" or "beautiful", the concept is to be regarded in a strict and narrow anthropocentric and biological sense. In order for a particular species to maintain itself and increase its power, its conception of reality must comprehend enough of the calculable and constant for it to base a scheme of behavior on it. The utility of preservation - not some abstract-theoretical need not to be deceived - stands as the motive behind the development of the organs of knowledge - they develop in such a way that their observations suffice for our preservation. In other words : the measure of the desire for knowledge depends upon the measure to which the will to power grows in a species : a species grasps a certain amount of reality in order to become master of it, in order to press it into service. (Nietzsche 1968: 266-267)

The subordination of utility to the will-to-power lies on the basis of relativistic

²³⁶ Spengler conflates the two on the basis of their manifestation in America and Russia. His observation anticipate remarkably, the course these two cultures have taken and the effects for the rest of the globe. (1934 : 67-69)

²³⁷ For an excellent commentary on Nietzsche's use of fictions, see Hans Vaihinger's "The Philosophy of As-if" (1949 : 341-362), where one encounters early versions of Spengler's attack on causality by Nietzsche. The mythological picture of causality, the emphasis on perspectivism and the incorporation of falsehood as a category of life, are particularly striking.

formulations. It is thus no accident that the notion of utility crops up, mostly in covert form, in classical rather than modern relativistic epistemology. However I have to stress that the notion of utility that these thinkers resort to has nothing to do with the Anglo-Saxon conception of utility of Mill or Bentham which the vitalists, at least Spengler²³⁸, clearly avoided since it was formulated around the - derogatory - notion of the mass and the collectivity. Instead we're dealing here with an individualistic (or perhaps, psychological ?) notion of utility, a recurrent theme also in Simmel's relativism. For example, if I say that I would like to appropriate or possess an object A that I hadn't previously encountered over my life-experience, and I have the desire to possess it, then this means the following : firstly, that my *desire* places object A in direct relevance (i.e. utility) to my life (practical, psychological etc) ; secondly, that the exploitation of its potentialities are useful for *me* only ; thirdly, that I have the potential (i.e. power) to possess it and utilize it. If I succeed, then I am master of that in relation to which, previously, I was a slave or a simple spectator : I possess its properties and I am able to appropriate them for a variety of purposes a, b, c, . . . The outcome Aa , Ab, Ac, . . . denotes *my knowledge* of the object's potentialities, only in so far as *my power* allows its actualizations (*utility*).

It is noteworthy to observe that the relationship between utility, power and the relativity of knowledge lies at the core of Simmel's relativistic epistemology. Simmel by recourse to perspectivism - an epistemological principle of considerable significance for Spengler - sets up cultural relativism on the basis of action and its consequences. He makes the following hypothesis :

If we assert that man sustains and supports life only on the basis of true representations, and destroys it by false ones, what does this "truth" - the content of which is different for each species and which never reflects the true object - mean except that some representation associated with a particular organization and its powers and needs leads to useful results ? Initially, truth is not useful because it is true, but vice-versa. We dignify with the name of "truth" those representations that, active within us as real forces or motions, incite us to useful behavior. Thus there are as many basically different truths as there are different organizations and conditions of life. (Simmel 1978: 107)

This system of representations is not fleeting or momentary but has "a normative stability".²³⁹ In other words, it seems that it is innate within a species and that the actions

²³⁸ Spengler (1932 : 6) Simmel refers to utility as a concept of "many forms" , subject to historicism, but also with a particularly subtle biological foundation. The "adaptations and feelings of utility of the species" can mature as consciousness of an individual. (Simmel, 1968 : 76)

²³⁹ Simmel (1978 : 107)

of this species are geared towards its maintainance and nothing but this. Instinct, for example, can be regarded as a form of perception where an organism intuits - momentarily - the useful or destructive implications of a potential action based on an immediate perception. This instinct since it conforms within the "generally established truth" that exists in a species, cannot but operate at the service of the organism's will-to-survive, its will-to-power. This does not mean of course that falsehood is excluded. Falsehood is an integral part of life and it is because of falsehood (i.e. breakdown of the "desire - useful consequence" pattern²⁴⁰) that "truths" change and that the will-to-power struggles for domination. The relative validity of truth in relation to beings and their modes of life points to the more general fact that categories of knowledge differ because the interaction between beings and the world differs. Different locales set up different conditions in order to be *mastered* and the will-to-power proceeds accordingly. Domination means knowledge and knowledge stems from utility in the sense outlined above. In a Spenglerian manner, Simmel claims that what for us may be an undisputed truth, such as the "law of gravitation", for a being with "a different conception of space, different categories of thought and a different system of numbers"²⁴¹ this representation would not be true at all. It might not even be meaningful.

Returning to Spengler, we see how those themes have been given now a new form. Cultural relativism is a feature of Life's movement that manifests itself in History. The perpetual state of change that characterizes History refers to the "living" element in it. By following vitalistic dualisms, Spengler refers to the "absolute" and the "relative" as, ostensibly, equally deficient modes of comprehending the world since the former "ignores Time" and the latter Space.²⁴² However, in this sense, what is true for Simmel²⁴³, is not true for Spengler. The latter becomes here Bergsonian in method, only to prove the opposite of Bergson's conclusion.²⁴⁴ For Spengler, relativity (and its tool, analogy) is Life itself since it demonstrates truth not to be static and eternal (i.e substance), but rather

²⁴⁰ Simmel sets up this relationship (utility) as the only basis for defining "truth". He maintains that "we do not have any other definitive criterion for the truth of a representation except that the actions based upon it lead to the desired consequences". (ibid.: 108).

²⁴¹ Ibid.: 107 On this issue, Simmel combines Kuhnian relativism with cultural relativism or perspectivism. Nomological validity cannot be considered "because our comprehension, which cannot distinguish between the recurrent but fortuitous combination of phenomena and actual causal relationships, is necessarily **subject to correctibility** ,[...] [and also] because each law of nature is valid only for a definite state of mind, whereas for another one the truth would lie in a different formulation of the same factual state of affairs". (Ibid.: 509 [Emphasis added]).

²⁴² Spengler (1928 : 274)

²⁴³ Simmel, as we have seen from the previous chapter, is synthetic in his use of dualisms while the rest of the vitalists built their theories in favour of a set of dualisms as opposed to the other set.

²⁴⁴ Bergson sees statics as relative and false while dynamics is absolute and true. See chapter 4.

eternally dynamic (i.e. motion).

Before though I proceed in demonstrating in some detail Spengler's precise use of dualistic vitalism, I shall have to return to an argument adressed in the beginning of this section. It refers to the grounds Spengler offers for the validity of his own statement about cultural relativism. For Spengler, the concept of "world-history" is an exclusively Western construct. It is as he aptly puts it "*our* world picture and not all mankind's".²⁴⁵ This world-image is inextricably linked with the concept of progress which in practical terms is translated to Western Imperialism and World-domination (mainly, economical and ideological). This is, precisely, the situation in our present times. Since Faustian Culture has "spread over the entire globe", Spengler proposes a method of inquiry in order to grasp its course over the centuries that derives from its own conditions and fulfills its own particular needs for understanding. In other words a Western method for the understanding of Western civilization that - unfortunately, according to Spengler - through domination has imposed itself on all other continents. Thus, physiognomic history is an "operative method peculiar to . . . the Decline of that West-European Culture".²⁴⁶ Spengler does not present his vision of the Western world as being "dissociated from the conditions imposed by blood and by history", therefore being "true in itself".²⁴⁷ It is true for him, but also true for those who experience the same vicissitudes of life as they share the same socio-historical context with the Faustian Culture that draws slowly but steadily towards its close. The symptoms he identified remain with us in all their malign form, their meaning irrevocable as our Destiny is irreversible. It is thus all the more interesting to look at those symptoms in the last part of this chapter and bring Spengler's and Simmel's world-views into contact. However, we still need to explore all the parameters of Spengler's epistemology in order to comprehend the intricate character of his philosophical and moral universe. Especially since there is a very complex treatment of relativism among major vitalist thinkers where despite wide intersecting areas in their theories, one sees clearly, differences in method that result to discrepancies in world-views (hence, for example, Bergson's optimism as opposed to Spengler's relentless but heroic pessimism). Therefore, a brief glance at vitalism and irrationalism *per se* will certainly contribute towards this goal.

c) Lebensphilosophie and irrationalism :

The case of *lebensphilosophie* as a philosophical movement is a very intriguing one for the reasons I have outlined in my previous chapters. The fact that it stemmed out of

²⁴⁵ Spengler (1926 : 15)

²⁴⁶ Ibid.: 50

²⁴⁷ *ibid.*: xiii

biology and physiology²⁴⁸ grants it with claims to validity (Bergson's *élan vital*) that other world-views failed to attain. Hence the reduction of sociological explanation - via psychologism - to biological assumptions blended through transcendental principles. It is therefore necessary to bring what is perhaps the most comprehensive vitalistic theory - Spengler's - into a clearer focus by looking at its bipolar epistemological structure more closely.

I have claimed in the beginning of this chapter that Spengler's thought was influenced by Bergson's. This is true only in so far as the method itself is concerned irrespective of the conclusions reached. That is, Bergson's legacy lies in Spengler's extensive use of dualisms which he transferred from the former's biological and metaphysical realm to that of History. In relation to their final judgements though, these two thinkers are not in alignment.

As is the case with every exponent of *lebensphilosophie* , Spengler's theory is one of tensions between opposites. It is a dualistic philosophy throughout that has stemmed out of the author's protest against the preponderance of one system of dualisms over another. Thus, socio-cultural critique was immediately conceptualized and experienced through the prism of archetypal dualisms that date back even before the dawn of Western thought with the Greeks, to primitive symbolism that has arisen out of man's confrontation with death. Spengler, faithful to symbolic archetypes, bases the foundation of these dualisms in a synthetic form where "to birth belongs death" and to "life . . . its form and allotted span".²⁴⁹ The actualization of this opposition that generates all the further ramifications of the one primordial dualism²⁵⁰ can be clarified if we look at the arena within which the tension materializes. Spengler sets it up as follows :

I distinguish *being* or "being there" (*Dasein*) from *waking-being* or waking-consciousness (*Wachsein*). Being possesses beat and direction, while waking-consciousness is tension and extension. In being a destiny rules, while waking-consciousness distinguishes causes and effects. (Spengler 1928: 7)

Spengler though evades some consequences of the opposition by designating "tension" as

²⁴⁸ One needs only to look at the debates between vitalists and materialists in physiology to see how this philosophical position was shaped in its contemporary form within the boundaries of natural science proper. See Claude Bernard's, "Phenomena of Life", (1974). But what is more astonishing is that it also achieved a thorough philosophical expression (Bergson) and an acute but unconventional impact on sociology (Simmel) which makes it's absence from contemporary sociological discourse, all the more paradoxical since recent debates (discourse on postmodernity) hold on to positions firstly articulated by the vitalists.

²⁴⁹ Spengler, (1926 : 40)

²⁵⁰ Life - Death

belonging to "polarity" (according to his dualisms, death and microcosm), while "beat" is a property of "periodicity" (cosmic, becoming, Life).²⁵¹ Two different paths that start from a purely Bergsonian antithesis : instinct and intelligence or as Spengler holds, instinct and reason (and respectively, fact and truth, destiny and causality, physiognomy and system). Despite the fact, and still on Bergsonian lines, that instinct and reason exist in consciousness, their role within it gives rise to two fundamentally different kinds of relationships between consciousness and Being. Where instinct is dominant, consciousness is "*servant* of Being" while in reason's realm, it is presented "as *master* of Being".²⁵² By de-centralizing instinct from the core of Being's existence, Spengler avoids a lapse on uncritical irrationalism, which was something that happened to Bergson but not to Simmel. Similarly, by making reason central to Being and master of its existence - whereas again, in other cases instinct might be dominant but never a master but simply a servant - Spengler re-locates intelligence in its proper role which is deficient precisely because it makes absolute claims to Being. I shall come back to this existential excursus by Spengler in the concluding part of this section. Before that stage though, I consider it essential to dwell on most of the range of these dualisms in order to illuminate Spengler's cartography of Western man and his destiny from the depths of his existence to the surface of his practical every-day life.

The catalytic influence of Bergson's vitalism is palpable in most of Spengler's formulations. Operating between positive and negative polarities, Spenglerian vitalism seems to remain within a territory already explored by the Frenchman. Again, man is Time because man *lives* and intuits while whatever "is not experienced and felt" but is "merely thought, necessarily takes a *spatial* form."²⁵³ This is why, according to Spengler, in the realm of pure thought the conception of Time and Space has had only nebulous and inadequate definitions (i.e. Kant). It is in lived experience that man is captivated by time, where man indeed is becoming time and duration. Spengler is unequivocal about the preponderance of Life and Time over Matter and Space. The essence of "becoming" is "direction" (Time) which in itself "is the origin of extension" (Space).²⁵⁴ But this internal relationship manifests itself exoterically as well, in the context of man's interaction with his environment. Thus, for Spengler, the opposition between will and thought and their epiphenomena, goes back to philosophical-biological conceptions of evolution. Goethian naturalism which presents evolution as "upright" and "organic", and revealing itself as

²⁵¹ Spengler, (1928 : 4)

²⁵² Spengler, (1926 : 154)

²⁵³ *Ibid.*: 124

²⁵⁴ *ibid.*: 172

symbol, leads to "experience" and "inward fulfillment", whereas Darwinian evolutionism being "flat" and "mechanical", is comprehended through "cognition and law" in a path towards "progress".²⁵⁵ Individualism and momentary fulfillment - or a glimpse of Life -, contrasts with teleology and chronic understanding. This aversion to anything that is a creation of the intellect and claims autonomy and eternal validity stems from the idolatrous relationship between man and Nature that Spengler describes. This is evident in Spengler's subsequent dualisms that characterize also most of the sociology of that time in overt or covert form (Tönnies, Simmel, Durkheim, Weber). The multi-structural crises of modernization during the late 19th, early 20th century, could only be contrasted with a type of social organization that was changing form rapidly and was about to be completely marginalised. The provincial way of life, with all its romantic pre-conceptions generated by the bourgeoisie, was brought to the forefront of sociological explanation not only for purposes of knowledge and explanation but also as a means for imposing moral imperatives. These emphasized features of a communitarian way of life the residues of which had moulded pre-vitalist (Goethe, Nietzsche) and vitalist (Bergson, Simmel etc.) thought. It was thus precisely the biological bond between man and earth that formed the axis of the new philosophy of culture. In Spengler these changes are palpable and although I shall be dealing with them in detail in the next section, I have at least to point to them in order to demonstrate the concrete, rather than abstract, character of his vitalist thought. Thus, Spengler on the basis of the prime-distinctions we've seen so far, distinguished between "race" and "language"²⁵⁶, "reason" and "mysticism"²⁵⁷, "peasantry" and "society"²⁵⁸, "estate" and "party"²⁵⁹, "symbol" and "catchword"²⁶⁰, "feminine" and "masculine"²⁶¹ all aspects of the metamorphosis, from "Culture" to "Civilization".

I ought to stress again that Spengler's vitalism is difficult to evaluate because it includes fragments from previous and substantially different to each other world-views. It is this amalgam of philosophical positions that is a source of confusion for Spengler critics. For example, does Spengler eliminate the category of potentiality ? Is it a purely introspective philosophy ? Answers are ambivalent and often contradictory. It seems that

²⁵⁵ *ibid.*: 370

²⁵⁶ Spengler, (1928 : 114)

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*: 305

²⁵⁸ *ibid.*: 331

²⁵⁹ *ibid.* : 449

²⁶⁰ *ibid.*: 401

²⁶¹ *ibid.* : 327-328

the notion of Destiny has overshadowed all other facets of Spengler's thought to such an extent that one does not read in Spengler anything but pure fatalism. But his theory seems to be more sophisticated than it has been regarded so far, and it seems highly plausible that his purposelessness implicit in his system has cost him a place in the pantheon of great contemporary philosophers. By making evolution and growth, as consequences of the will-to-power, ends in themselves, Spengler avoided rendering the category of action defunct. It appears defunct only if seen within the dominant paradigm - bourgeois, conventional and money-driven - of social science and philosophy that seeks legitimacy of method rather than plausibility of result. Thus, in what is a synopsis of his vitalism, Spengler claims that

All living is politics, in every trait of instinct, in the inmost marrow. That which we nowadays like to call life-energy (vitality), the "it" in us that at all costs strives forward and upward, the blind cosmic drive to validity and power that at the same time remains plantwise and racewise, bound up with the earth, the "home"-land; the directedness, the need to actualize - it is this that appears in every higher mankind, as its political life, seeking naturally and inevitably the great decisions that determine whether it shall be, or shall suffer, a Destiny. For it grows or *it dies out* ; there is no third possibility. (Spengler 1928: 440)

Despite the solipsistic form of the will-to-power, the rest of Spengler's vitalism is based on the inner need to create in order to fully develop the potentialities dormant in a particular race with its relationship to landscape and its interaction (differentiation, conflict) with other peoples. The issue is *action*, either *as carrier* of Destiny or *as subject* to Destiny. In both cases we can discern clearly the natural divisions that Spengler maintains in translating his philosophy into the language of everyday conduct. In looking at the peoples around us, Spengler would maintain, we see them divided into those who become masters over their destiny - which is no other than their confrontation with a *given* world - or captives of their destiny and vehicles for other peoples' realizations and visions. To adapt to one's destiny²⁶² as a struggle for survival is to break away the illusion of permanence since every creator and everything created²⁶³ are ephemeral points in a process that is bound to end into oblivion.

Spengler's pessimism is not shared by other vitalists at least not in this nihilistic form. Despite the lament for the loss of *Gemeinschaft* vitalist thinkers had different ways of reacting to the changes they were witnessing. The range of the philosophical positions which have been discussed can be presented schematically as follows :

²⁶² Spengler, (1932 : 15)

²⁶³ Ibid.: 14

EPISTEMOLOGY CULTURAL CRITIQUE

	<u>Relative</u>	<u>Absolute</u>	<u>Direction of action</u>	<u>Existential Implications</u>
Bergson	statics (false)	dynamics(true)	upward (élan vital)	spiritual optimism
Simmel	dynamics (true) { <i>more-life</i> }	statics (true) { <i>more-than-life</i> }	contradictory(tragedy)	melancholic pessimism
Spengler	dynamics (true)	statics (false)	downward (destiny)	heroic nihilism

It is important here to note that the only point where the three thinkers are in accord is the equating of dynamic movement with truth, whether it is in the realm of the absolute or the relative. Thus with vitalism we reach the point where epistemology assumes grand existential proportions ; it becomes the explanatory framework within which socio-political events unfold reinforcing it rather than undermining it. What was happening with Marxism, was also happening with vitalism since Nietzsche : a radical transformation of the socio-political arena that penetrated every cultural sphere. And it is not accidental that these world-views - the materialist and the vitalist - are in direct opposition to each other. Yet, the recent decline of the former points to the plausibility of the latter, aspects of which recur today under the vulgarized form of post-modernity or under a tribute to the anti-modernism of Nietzsche. Before though I proceed in examining cultural transformations that recall these discussed by Simmel and Spengler I have to refer briefly to the cornerstone of rationalism that was subjected to severe polemics : natural science.

d) Nature - knowledge and vitalism :

This gradual corrosion of reason as such by vitalist thought was bound to affect other areas that were synonymous with it. Since Nietzsche's warnings against the portentous edifice of reason, there have been many attacks by eminent vitalist thinkers within the realms of philosophy, social science and the humanities. History was the first bulwark of nomological rationality to collapse under the banner of *Verstehen* and life, and then soon after, positivistic sociology experienced a similar demolition primarily at the hands of Simmel and Weber. However what seemed lacking from those thinkers in an articulated and systematic form was an attack on scientific reason *per se* . In both Simmel and Weber, of course, there are references to the extreme rationalization and calculability that characterizes modern science. Additionally, both thinkers seem on the verge of a Kuhnian interpretation of science. In Simmel we have already seen the approach where theoretical scientific frameworks that are valid for a particular historical period are bound

to be questioned and abandoned in another as "obsolete and dubious".²⁶⁴ In Weber's seminal lecture on "Science as a Vocation" we encounter the same theme, that is, "every scientific 'fulfillment' raises new 'questions' ; it *asks* to be 'surpassed' and outdated."²⁶⁵ But this scrutiny of the scientific enterprise was mostly to be interpreted with the technical side of science that was seen as the reason for the suffocating for the individual, atmosphere in big urban centers. This is also true for Spengler's attack on Western science although there is a differentiating factor that elevates him onto a separate sphere of discourse : his attempt to repudiate causality and reduce the physical sciences and mathematics to mythical constructs: indeed, the most ambitious of all attempts to subvert the very foundations of natural sciences! It has to be said though that the soil was ripe for Spengler's assault, even against this seemingly immune realm of social life. For example, in describing the history and dissemination of ideas at that time in Weimar Germany, Schnädelbach holds that :

For Ernst Mach, Richard Avenarius and Hans Vaihinger, concepts, theories, indeed scientific rationality in general, were nothing but servants of life - means of achieving economy and fictions, which had no ontic basis in the flux of appearances. (Schnädelbach 1984: 147)

The anti-foundationalist critique of science from a quasi-vitalist perspective, seems to have been instigated throughout the scope of German thought, but it is interesting to observe that scientists such as Mach conceded to this approach. In general, it could be argued that philosophical and natural scientific thought had entered a period of mutual relationship and interaction where each was looking at the other for legitimation despite the polemical tone that was prevalent in both camps. For example, Simmel in his attempt to clarify his relativistic theory, set up as an exemplar the late developments in physics :

the basic tendency of modern science is no longer to comprehend phenomena through or as specific substances, but as motions, the bearers of which are increasingly divested of any specific qualities; and it expresses the qualities of things in quantitative, i.e. relative, terms. (Simmel 1978: 102-103)

Simmel in this Machian exposition of his relativism approaches scientific discourse for purposes of legitimation. Such an orientation was to be expected considering the two major developments in physics during that era : Einstein's theory of relativity and Heisenberg's and Schrödinger's quantum mechanics. I shall not concern myself here with

²⁶⁴ Simmel in Lukács (1980 : 445)

²⁶⁵ Weber, (1948 : 138)

the accuracy of Simmel's parallelism ; what seems to be more challenging is the other side of the coin where the most fierce attack on science resulted in the latter's re-appraisal of its own image. According to a controversial article by Paul Forman this schism within natural science was the outcome of *lebensphilosophie* 's influence and in particular of Spengler's attack on causality.²⁶⁶ Considering the structural turbulence of the era and in the light of the vitalists' diagnosis of an all-pervasive cultural crisis, one has to look at Spengler's demolition of Faustian constructs, such as science, and the means which he uses. These are no different from the ones used in similar attacks and are no other than cultural relativism and Faith. But let us look closer at the various levels of this critique.

Spengler proceeds by looking at the cogency of the criteria that grant science its validity within the context of a Culture. Science, as a realm of knowledge, is subjected to the same scrutiny as other knowledge-forms of the world like religion, art, or politics that have evolved in the same Culture. In other words, it has no special autonomy regarding questions of its validity. Therefore, whatever foundation is to be sought for the validity of science has to be sought within the Western Culture of which it expresses its Soul. For Spengler, man in his attempt to answer the problems posed by nature, "can only *believe* in the correctness of his answer"²⁶⁷ and nothing more than that. All knowledge-claims are questions of belief rather than demonstration. They are valid only in so far as they are useful in solving problems within their own contexts. It is when they make claims outside these contexts that they remain trapped within the notion of "causality" or "proof". This is *the* very primitive form of belief that Spengler has in mind. Man thinks in abstract terms, only on the basis of a "religious world-picture" upon which all mental constructs including science have "grown up on".²⁶⁸ For Spengler, every scientific theory as every religion, is anthropomorphic in nature since it evolves according to the "inner certitude", to the will-to-power, to the "mirror" image "of its author".²⁶⁹ In the place of the objective truth of a scientific theory we get its utility that is subject to change as the conditions of life change. Accordingly, and introducing a strong historicist element, Spengler maintains that

A theory of natural science is nothing but a historically older dogma in another shape. And the only profit from it is that which life obtains, in the shape of a successful technique, to which theory has

²⁶⁶ Forman (1971 : 1-115)

²⁶⁷ Spengler, (1928 : 12)

²⁶⁸ Ibid.: 13

²⁶⁹ Spengler, (1926 : 381). Similarly Spengler holds that it is the will-to-power of certain great personalities - physicists - that cultivates the illusion of a valid system, hence that "every atomic theory, [...] is a myth and not an experience." (Ibid.: 387)

provided the key. It has already been said that the value of a working hypothesis resides not in its "correctness" but in its usability. (Spengler 1928: 270)

Utility is made again a means of explanation in order to demonstrate the relativity of knowledge, not to mention the conflation of knowledge with power. To this utility, Spengler subordinates all of the exact sciences unconditionally. But for Spengler, there was one step that had to be made in order for this edifice to be demolished altogether in its present, systematic form : a refutation of the *a priori* of causality that science even today holds sacred as a pre-condition for its very existence. Within the tradition of Bergson and Simmel who both contested the Kantian form of causality, Spengler in a more efficient way, traces causality back to its simple primordial form as a mechanism of explanation. The relation of "cause" and "effect" - from its simplest to its most complex form - is a relation of "power and rank"²⁷⁰ that man ascribes to things in order to organize them and to be able to appropriate them as experience for future activity. It is a process of continuous assembly of elements that have been in a vacuum but now are present in a coherent form and are able to follow a certain pattern of behavior irrespective of time and space. Within this system of perfectly organized relationships, man finds "refuge from the unforeseen. He who can demonstrate, fears no longer".²⁷¹ This is what lies, according to Spengler, at the heart of the problem of causality : fear. It is the factor that elevates the function of thought and intelligence onto an absolute and from the throne of Reason looks down on inferior forms of man's confrontation with the world, such as religion. In order to grasp the problem of motion²⁷² man needs to resort to statics : concept, formula, causality, law, dogma etc. What happens in reality though, and what Spengler seeks to demonstrate is the fact that this magnificent structure called science if traced back to its proto-forms of existence and creation resides on an undoubtedly non-scientific fact. Its very foundation is *arbitrarily* taken for granted *as* a scientific fact. It is an *a priori* assumption without which science or indeed any other form cannot develop. It is precisely the extra-scientific or better anthropomorphic nature of this fact that Spengler seeks to unmask. Its name as far as science is concerned is "causality", but as Spengler brilliantly shows its conception represents only the Faustian mind's reaction to fear. This discussion is reminiscent of Simmel who attempted, although in much lesser scale, to achieve the same in his discussion of relativist epistemology. Simmel suggests that as far as law is concerned the primordial right which is taken as axiomatic for the development

²⁷⁰ Spengler, (1928 : 14)

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² *ibid.*: 15

of the interconnected and complex structure of legal predicates, is not in itself a "legal fact" but it is "established by force or other means".²⁷³ Recalling Vaihinger's philosophy of fictions, Simmel stresses the fact that "every power that establishes such a non-legal right strives for its legitimation or for the fiction of legitimacy...".²⁷⁴ For Spengler and Nietzsche this pre-legal fact would have been simply a manifestation of the will-to-power and it would simply point to the anthropomorphic and purely symbolic nature of that fact.²⁷⁵ But when statics is presented as the mode of life *per se* and aspects of it are presented as either eternal truths or as monopolies of knowledge, it is at this point where life rebels and breaks down the old, antiquated forms, and reminds man of an old but artificially forgotten fact :

Fear before death is the source, not merely of all religion, but of all philosophy and natural science as well. Now, however, there develops a profane Causality in contrast to the sacred. "Profane" is the new counter-concept to "religious"[. . .] (Spengler 1928: 345)

[...] world-fear is assuredly the most *creative* of all prime feelings. Man owes to it the ripest and deepest forms and images, not only of his conscious inward life, but also of the infinitely-varied external culture which reflects life. (Spengler 1926: 79)

This is again one of the symptoms of transition from Culture to Civilization, that was also captured by Tönnies, Simmel and Weber. The move from religion to science is the course of modern life although, as I shall demonstrate later, according to Spengler's anticipations we have reached the ultimate limits of this transition. Natural science as a repository of the man of Culture's creativity has been driven along the lines of technique, and its faith-form has been reduced to the "machine-form of exact science".²⁷⁶ But Science shall follow the path of every other creation of the Faustian Culture : it will expand more and more, it will

²⁷³ Simmel (1978 : 105)

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ At this point it might be useful to see some of Simmel's assumptions on this matter. Simmel holds that apparently, "the mythological mode of thought is also at home within the natural scientific world view" (ibid.: 483). He points to the delusive character of the scientists' attitude toward nature which seems to be one of power and control. Within the natural-scientific paradigm it is this will-to-power that generates natural laws as means of domination (causality is one of those means) over nature. For Simmel this rationale is fallacious. He argues against the misinterpretation to "conquer or control of nature" (ibid.: 482) simply because nature is in a state of indifference towards man rather than resistance. Nature's "subjugation [by man] does not affect its own regularities"(ibid.) Although Simmel here is on the right track in pointing to the fictional animosity between man and nature in relation to the preponderance of technology, he seems to lack Spengler's sagacity on the same matter. Spengler although in agreement with Simmel in his condemnation of the excessive arrogance of man to overpower nature, foresees the disruption of nature's "regularities" unlike Simmel. His anticipation of ecological disasters and extinction of races as a result of the Faustian will-to-power (1932 : 93-94), accounts for the link of quasi-vitalist thinkers (Feyerabend, Maffessoli) with issues of ecology.

²⁷⁶ Spengler, (1926 : 417)

ramify to the point where the creators will lose sight of the end in an infinite series of means, and with its utility being made null it will fade and dissolve into the same darkness from which millenia ago it had risen in order to conquer the world. Its remnants, shall be the only testimony to what the late Faustian Soul shall bequeath to the new Culture :

The re-treatment of theoretical physics, of chemistry, of mathematics as a sum of symbols - this will be the definitive conquest of the mechanical world-aspect by an intuitive, once more religious, world-outlook, a last master-effort of physiognomic to break down even systematic and to absorb it, as expression and symbol, into its own domain. (Spengler 1926: 425)

The analogical approach propagated here is the means by which Spengler is able to make comments about other cultures without falling into contradiction. Analogy establishes cultural relativism rather than refutes it. This is something that Spengler must have learned from Simmel's analogical sociology. And Spengler's relativization of numbers, mathematics and causality bears the stamp of the physiognomic - analogical method he advocates.

Regarding causality and destiny which Spengler constantly opposes, the debate enters territory which transcends the scope and potential of this chapter. However, I ought briefly to outline some further implications of Spengler's attack on causality for they ultimately encapsulate once more the problem of Culture and Civilization as he contemplated it. The reactions against Spengler's notion of causality are based more or less on similar grounds. Paul Forman²⁷⁷ outlines several of them from the realm of physical science. A common line of attack suggests the following : if Spengler renders causality as only one particular mode of explanation which is a product of the Faustian Culture, then how does he account for the fact that the measuring rod which he uses - i.e. the process from birth to death of cultures - in order to evaluate all phenomena, is actually no more than a deterministic scheme that follows a causal order of relationships. Decline and death of organisms or creations of beings signify teleology on the basis of an already known process. In other words, Spengler takes causality as an *a priori* and disguises it under the form of evolution, development, transformation but above all, destiny. This reasoning I think is false for several reasons, and is based on the common misinterpretation of fatalism as something that eliminates action. It is as if one could argue that human beings precisely because they die - and we all know that for a *fact* - are automatically rendered devoid of the category of action. This is something that Spengler clearly did not mean. Action is simply the struggle for acceptance of this fact. Spengler

²⁷⁷ Forman (1971 : 48-115)

therefore is right to include in this process the "objective culture" - to use Simmelian terminology - as well. "Objective culture" since it is the product of action is developed as a reaction to the only fact we know and aspects of it such as science proceed accordingly in relation to fear of mortality. "Destiny" simply denotes the name of the only thing we know with certainty. "Causality" is the treatment of this process as statics and as a thing. Causality refers to eternity but as Spengler holds

[...] impermanence, the birth and the passing, is the *form of all that is actual* - from the stars, whose destiny is for us incalculable, right down to the ephemeral concourses on our planet [...] Every creation is foredoomed to decay, every thought, every discovery, every deed to oblivion. (Spengler 1932: 13-14)

Causality creates only fictions such as laws that are held to be timeless explanations. The only thing that remains is the *momentary*, that which is intuited and felt and is able to place man within time and duration. Causality which neglects the momentary is clearly a Western fiction and a safeguard against the chaotic actuality of transformations that characterizes the world. The only reason causality is taken for granted today is because of the imperialism of the Western mind that presents Causality as the Gospel of Truth and turns science and capitalist economy into globalizations of truth. What Spengler says is very simple but paradoxically critics stick to the detail in order to refute his theory and miss its kernel. Every *creator* and *thing-created* undergo the same process. Creation, and completion are followed by "emptiness" which is nothing else than "fulfilment".²⁷⁸ Spengler warns against the hope of transcending this fact and thus points to the futility of action, whether scientific research or literary meditation, in this respect only. Action is worthy only as manifestation of the (creative) will-to-power. According to Spengler, any attempt to grant the *thing-created* with absolute and eternal validity is delusive. As it was conceived and realized so shall it die and disappear, just as will its creator, only much later. It is this emphasis on the momentary and irreversible process which defies causality, that has led Spengler to adhere, briefly but firmly, to statistics as opposed to causality. Forman cites arguments against Spengler's position that hold that "every utilization of statistics 'postulates causality', but because of the great complexity the causal interconnections cannot be traced in detail".²⁷⁹ But for Spengler it is precisely this unknown factor that renders it possible to turn statistics against causality. It is an *a priori* to render these "hidden parameters" causal, therefore adhering to the so-called factor of complexity in order to keep operating with causality. Spengler though makes these

²⁷⁸ Spengler (1932 : 12)

²⁷⁹ Forman (1971 : 73)

"hidden parameters" acausal, being in a state of "disorder" and mutual interference.²⁸⁰ By re-locating the exact sciences within a wider framework of the "Calculus of Probabilities"²⁸¹, Spengler elevates contingency onto a dynamic *fact* of Life.

Number, as the prime-symbol of Faustian Culture, tends to devour every other form and translate it to purely numerical terms. The widespread belief in our days on the numerical representation of Life itself - hence the convergence of separate sciences - shall reduce everything into a "few ground-formulae"²⁸² only for man to discover that all this edifice is purely physiognomic, and religiously "anthropomorphic"²⁸³ in nature. What remains for us to examine here is the actual relationship of Spenglerian epistemology with the theory of culture and civilization parallel to that of Simmel. My contention is that both thinkers' relativism and vitalism - despite the differences - yielded to a profoundly similar description of modern life as a consequence or better, as the visible physiognomic manifestation of their epistemology.

III. The Cultural Critique of Civilization

The actual relationship between Simmel and Spengler may not yet have been clear to the reader from the previous excursion into the latter's epistemology. Or, as the reader might have interpreted it, there is a relationship but there is no absolute convergence. This is only partially true. In the previous section on epistemology I focused on Spengler's epistemology because it seems to me that it amalgamates most of the substantive issues and ideas that had shaped vitalistic philosophy by that time. As I indicated in terms of epistemology proper, the thoughts of Spengler and Simmel are not in perfect harmony. For example, cultural relativism comprises the core of Spengler's theory of culture. For Simmel though, relationism is the predominant idea of his theory. Cultural relativism is undoubtedly present and noticeable in Simmel as well, despite the fact that it remains only tangential to his epistemological discussion. On the other hand the use by both thinkers of analogical thought may account for the same "spirit" that permeates their description of social reality.

It is the aim of this section to place Spengler and Simmel in close proximity and to show that the two most prominent classical thinkers of modernity have identified the same

²⁸⁰ Spengler (1926 : 421)

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² *ibid.*: 425

²⁸³ *ibid.*: 427

symptoms of a society in crisis. They have interpreted them in different - though not entirely incompatible - ways, and their ultimate existential meanings are only slightly divergent. Here, I shall extend and hopefully offer a competent treatment of what I have only indicated in the previous chapter on Simmel and Bergson : namely, the epistemologically grounded critique of society. That is, the need to see modern society from the perspective of two particularly rigorous but unacceptably marginalised theoretic tools : relativism and vitalism. My claim is that it is mainly through relativism and vitalism that one can get an accurate description of modern society. Both approaches recur in a covert and vulgarized form in postmodern thinking and I would like to dissociate my interpretation from any such approach for reasons that I shall clarify at the end of the current study. At the present stage I simply wish to draw the axes along which Simmel's thought was guided in terms of a sociology of culture. For this purpose I rely on certain key essays, such as "The Conflict in Modern Culture", "The Metropolis and Mental Life", "On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture", "The Relative and the Absolute in the Problem of the Sexes", "The Ruin" and others, as well as on certain excerpts from *The Philosophy of Money* . In these essays one can see how the deep crisis of culture has cut into several levels of social life and has left none unaffected whether it is art, science, gender, or religion. In order to keep up with the development of both thinkers' scrutiny of Western Culture and Civilization, I shall be contrasting these themes in Simmel with Spengler's similar meditation in *The Decline of the West* and *Man and Technics* .

Indeed, it seems that the appropriate starting point should be searched where we left our discussion on Simmel, Bergson and culture. The structural transformation from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* was interpreted as a transformation from a religious world-outlook to a technological world-view. Both visions had a strong laical component that facilitated the transition to a mass culture with all its negative implications as has been described by Tönnies, Troeltsch to the Frankfurt School. This vast issue is not possible to categorize clearly and without ambiguity. Especially since, as I keep stressing, epistemological or even metaphysical doubts mingle with the concrete vibrations of modern man's everyday existence. Therefore the following zones of exploration into Simmel's and Spengler's cultural theories overlap. Themes that are at first glance the property of one section may be illuminated under another. It is the length of the discussion that forces me to resort to the technique of dissection of themes. It is my hope though that the argument shall not become fragmented but that it shall retain its coherence and plausibility throughout the essay.

In short, I shall be looking firstly, at the fundamental notion addressed by classical sociologists and the one that in a sense characterizes current debates especially under the

rubric of postmodernity : technology and its role in modern life. Here Spengler is particularly enlightening. The interrelation between technics and civilization is to be assessed, and the vehicle for this direction is technology which both Simmel and Spengler saw as the dominant form of modern life. Next, my endeavour will be geared towards the "key-concepts" that both thinkers use in order to describe the negative impact of technological autonomy for the individual and consequently for the social whole. Thus, I shall analyze the notions of "tragedy" and "destiny", firstly in relation to each other and secondly, in conjunction with the modern culture and civilization. This shall bring me to the third part of this section where, according to both thinkers, the locus of the tragic destiny of the West is to be found in the city. The metropolitan and megalopolitan way of life, chronically shaped and critically traumatized by the advanced money economy embodies both notions of tragedy and destiny. Finally, I shall conclude with the impact of vitalism for the assessment of modern life, an impact consciously negated by modern scholars but unconsciously present in almost every attempt to understand the present state of Western man. The descriptive and prognostic ambience of both Simmel and Spengler might not be palatable to conventional academia - which suffers from the same problems Nietzsche diagnosed more than a hundred years ago - but it captures almost intuitively and accurately *our* current state of *being-in-the-world* . What follows is the demonstration of why their contribution ought to be looked at afresh.

a) Technics, Technology and Civilization :

It is widely accepted that most of contemporary social theory deals - albeit with modifications - with problems that were identified by German classical theorists at the beginning of the century. It is perhaps a platitude to emphasize that the focal point of the sociological debate since then is the nature and effects of the plurality of changes that occurred primarily in the economic and industrial sectors of Western society. Their concomitant consequences are held to have permeated all social strata. These changes were detected at both the macro- and micro-sociological level : from the organizational transformation of prominent institutions such as the state, art or science to the alteration of the codes of daily interaction between citizens. To a large extent the very fabric of society had undergone a severe metamorphosis so that the opposition between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* could be interpreted as a qualitative change of man's world-view : from the microcosmos of the peasant to the macrocosmos of the city-dweller. This should not be interpreted as a reductionistic statement. It simply denotes the individualistic prism under which the Culture - Civilization antithesis is examined and it is generally the perspective from which German thinkers sought to comprehend this conflict of world-views. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that along with the dualistic philosophy of vitalism that was erected as an alternative to these changes since Nietzsche, a dualistic sociology emerged

and operated within the same pessimistic and uncertain atmosphere. This type of sociology was first put into a systematic form by Ferdinand Tönnies. I do not intend here spending much time on his thought. However it is important that he is referred to since his cultural-epistemological categories have had a profound impact for both Simmel and Spengler among others. Of course, the reaction and utilization of Tönnies' arguments was manifold. As Liebersohn²⁸⁴ notes they generated an intellectual movement that oscillated between fatalism and utopia, the last residues of which, I think, are to be found in the thought of the Frankfurt School. Returning to Spengler, we see that his bipolar thinking is structured not only along Tönnies' main dualism but that it also abounds in all the sub-distinctions that the German sociologist had introduced. Their attitude being unequivocally naturalistic juxtaposes the organic with the mechanical, the fluid with the solid, the natural with the artificial, woman with man, creation with the will-to-power among others. Regarding society as such, it is often difficult to draw any sharp distinction between Tönnies and Spengler : for both, people is superior to state, culture to civilization, land to money, the town to metropolis, and art to science, to name but a few.

Similar themes preoccupied Simmel who was perhaps the first sociologist to look at the essential feature or form of this cultural mutation : technology. But how has the advent of technology shaped the human life ? Simmel in order to illuminate the question resorts to man's primordial relationship to his landscape and the way for appropriating it. The series "means-ends" is a key analytical tool for the understanding of the role of technology throughout humanity. Primitive life for example, was characterized by the attainment of basic needs through simple means while for more complicated desires an extended series of means had to be devised. As Simmel holds, modern technology has reversed this trend. It has prolonged "the teleological series for what is close to us"²⁸⁵ and has condensed the series for what is at a distance. In short, the implication of this cultural phenomenon is that the increasing complexity of means generates new purposes and new needs that are artificial in essence. Technology is reified and to use a cliché - that contains much truth though - it has become an end in itself. A simple symptom of this situation is the eradication of "anthropomorphic traits" and "individual colouration" from objects,²⁸⁶ as well as the creation of objects whose utility stems precisely from the alienated relationship they have with the consumer. They serve nothing of substance and their immediate consumption is the only factor that justifies their very existence. Anticipating Spengler, Simmel explains this displacement of ends on the basis of the increasingly

²⁸⁴ Liebersohn (1988), especially : 1-10

²⁸⁵ Simmel (1978 : 208

²⁸⁶ Simmel (1991 [1896] : 17)

complicated "technics of life".²⁸⁷ "Civilized man" is now a slave of the only thing that ultimately distinguishes him from other species ; his "interest in technics"²⁸⁸ has by far surpassed his need for it. Simmel clearly laments here from an individualistic perspective the axiological dislocation of man's needs and his entrapment in method and means. If we can ever maintain that Simmel occasionally falls back with nostalgia to a positive evaluation of *Gemeinschaft* in relation to the individual and his role within its confines, this is so because artistry is lacking from the modern man in general. Technology has invaded the microcosmos of man in such a way that his externalized and finalized energies are irrelevant to his inner being. Modern (civilized) society has legitimised this trend :

The tendency of creative people to think not about the cultural value of their work, but about its substantive meaning which is circumscribed by its unique idea, develops logically [...] into caricature, into a form of specialization which is secluded from life, into a purely technical (and technological) self-satisfaction which does not find its path back to man. (Simmel 1968: 45)

This vulgarized and reified form of the will-to-power cultivated by technology has caused man to compete in terms of invention and refinement of methods and technics, where the potential realization of the initial end is either lost in the immense space of means or is ultimately rendered irrelevant. Technology in its current form is both creator and product of the growing division of labour. It appears as creator in the form of specialization and as product in the form of stylization. Specialization refers to new technological avenues that obviously create new needs for manual but primarily mental labour. Stylization refers to the refinement of the technological method or implement itself caused precisely from the dissemination of new ideas through widespread specialized division of labour. It is a vicious circle where every fulfillment of the cyclic movement is accompanied by an increase in speed and subtlety of process. This is the course and fate of technology, indeed of man's technics in general. This idea is articulated with remarkable similarity by Spengler. However, before we examine his thoughts on technics, I ought to look at Simmel's epistemological justification of the aforementioned assumptions.

It is common with Simmel to be guided from culture to epistemology and vice versa. Herein lies his main strength : in the ability to provide concrete epistemological foundation for even the most ostensibly superficial descriptions of social life. In disputing the position of technology as *the* form of social life, Simmel also challenges indirectly science and causality albeit with different means than Spengler. In resorting to

²⁸⁷ Simmel (1978 : 231)

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

relativism, Simmel holds that it is a metaphysical error

[...] to transfer the attributes that the elements of a whole possess in relation to each other to the whole. It is this mistake through which, for example, the demand for a causal foundation valid for all *parts* of the world and their relationship to one another is also raised with reference to the whole world. It will probably appear most strange to the enthusiasts of modern technology that their attitude is based on the same formal mistake [. . .] And yet such is the case : the *relative* height that the technical progress of our time has attained in comparison with earlier circumstances and on the basis of the recognition of certain goals is extended by them to an *absolute* significance of these goals and this progress. (Simmel 1978: 482)

This may not be an entirely lucid formulation but its meaning seems to be unambiguous : the fact that technology has achieved an autonomy or domination over other spheres or forms of life which is relatively higher than the similar autonomy other dominant forms experienced in other eras, does not render technology a superior form and it does not deliver with unquestionable legitimacy the goals that were placed at the beginning of its ascent as a cultural form. But Simmel holds some reservations here. These doubts are the same that make him and Spengler resort to "tragedy" and "destiny" as the foundation for modern culture or civilization. Still with Simmel, we see how human consciousness has been swayed by the rationalization of the "scientific-technological age". Simmel in Spenglerian manner, talks here about the intellectualization of consciousness, its capitulation to causality and the general marginalization of "spirituality and contemplation".²⁸⁹ The dislocation of will from consciousness and its replacement by cause and effect is the source of the superfluous character of interaction in big urban centers where deterministic-mechanistic relationships blossom. The vehicle which facilitates, indeed materializes, this state of affairs is money. The apogee though of technical functionality is epitomized in the machine. The combination of symmetry and rhythm as elements upon which the whole technological infrastructure is based manifests itself most typically through the relation of the industrial worker to the machine in a factory. Whereas in previous epochs the rhythmic element in his work was geared towards "the demands" of his "physiological-psychological energies",²⁹⁰ in a modern factory this relationship has been reversed : the worker has to adjust his movements to those of the machine. It is in a sense no accident that Spengler concludes his appraisal of the West with the chapters on "money" and the "machine". Let us turn for the moment to his ideas about the latter and about technics in general.

²⁸⁹ *ibid.*: 484

²⁹⁰ *ibid.*: 491

As I have stressed earlier on it is never quite clear in Simmel whether technology is the new form of modern society or whether it is simply a form among others that has generated through its specific qualities a general fragmentation of the social whole. With Spengler this problem seems to have been solved. The advantage of the Spenglerian interpretation is that it sees technology as being indispensable of the modern human condition and that it traces its steps since the biological bifurcations that distinguish man from other species. Simmel on the other hand sees technology as simply a part of the general objectification of culture and looks at its implications in more or less the same way as he does with money. Both thinkers in general converge in their views of technology but it is with Spengler that the problem achieves a more unified form.

For Spengler the question of technics acquires its special character as a feature of social life because it refers simply to "purposive activity" and to man's "tactics of living".²⁹¹ Man is differentiated from other species because he is the creator of his own tactics of living. He forms culture and he is able through technics to actualize his creative potentialities, and to make the leap from what Simmel would call subjective to objective culture. Technics enables man to transcend the functional limits of action imposed to him by his strictly natural predisposition. As I have noted earlier, for Spengler, the ultimate value for human beings is placed on action which is creative and vigorous. It is action - stemming from the will-to-power - that determines whether one is a victor or a vanquished. Spengler looks at the bodily structure of man in order to provide a firm basis for his general theory of the will-to-power. The two fundamental organs for man are the eye and the hand. To these organs one can reduce the fundamental opposition of world-views and to comprehend the drama of Faustian man. The eye seeks "cause and effect" and aims at establishing a "truth", while the role of the hand is limited to "means and end" and is constrained to the world of "facts".²⁹² The former belongs to theory, the latter to action. It is on the basis of the hand that technics and technology develop since their essence is to attain with minimal friction the end through a series of means. It is to this problem that Simmel had identified prior to Spengler that the argument returns. For Spengler the process of refinement of technics (Culture) leads to its reification and its departure from man's prime-needs (Civilization). It is again an issue of means turned to ends that occurs only with advanced industrial society. The outcomes of this transformation are multiple. On one level, for example, technics provides easy solutions to problems that appeal and are accessible to the masses. Technological development is conducive to a levelling process which is directed downwards as both Simmel and

²⁹¹ Spengler (1932 : 10)

²⁹² Ibid.: 40

Spengler identify. Creativity is reduced to the accessibility of the mass and the few truly creative personalities are confronted with the threat of degradation to the homogeneity of plurality. This is a Nietzschean notion and Spengler fully adheres to it :

The wished-for escape from absorption by the large number takes various forms - lordship over it, flight from it, contempt for it. The idea of personality, in its dark beginnings, is a protest against humanity in the mass, and the tension between these grows and grows to its tragic finale. (Spengler 1932: 70)

In short, the refinement, specialization and reification of technics is bound together with the numerical representation of objective culture which is possible only by adhering to the needs of the mass. Simmel although on the same line of thought locates the problem of the degradation of individual intellectuality, in what at first glance seems to be opposite to what Spengler holds, as follows :

It is quite erroneous to believe that the significance and intellectual potential of modern life has been transferred from the form of the individual to that of the masses. Rather, it has been transferred to the form of the objects : it lives in the immense abundance, the marvellous expediency and the complicated precision of machines, products of the supra-individual organizations of contemporary culture. Correspondingly, the 'revolt of the slaves' that threatens to dethrone the autocracy and the normative independence of strong individuals is not the revolt of the masses, but the revolt of the objects. Just as, on the one hand, we have become slaves of the production process, so, on the other, we have become the slaves of the products. (Simmel 1978: 483)

Man's enslavement both to the "production process" which is no other than technics, and to objects, points to the trend that makes possible the servility of the mass to the world of products. But the subservient character of man's existence is an outcome of both the mass and the objects. The two are interrelated and the preponderance of the one depends on the preponderance of the other. Materialism was always the characteristic of mass societies. In order for the culture of objects to flourish the other more refined and spiritual aspects of man's culture have to be excluded from playing a significant role in his life. This is achieved only if they either become the property of intellectual or economic élites or if their value is lowered enough so that they can enter the sphere of mass consumption. The dictatorship of the objects can only materialize through the dictatorship of the mass and vice versa. Technology intersects both areas and this is the reason for its development and autonomy in the city where the "mass" and the "object" exist in mutual harmony. Simmel is right in illuminating the other side of the problem which is only implicit in Spengler who concentrates on man's incarceration by the process of technics. However,

it is paradoxical that Simmel reduces the tension of the relationship of mass and objects into one of one-sidedness where the latter dominates. But both thinkers are aware of the inner conflict between the Nietzschean "strong" personality against its servant (the mass) and its product (objects). Simmel tacitly suggests that the collapse of those exceptional personalities ("leaders" in Spenglerian terminology) shall come through their own seduction by the world of the objects and money. For Spengler the diagnosis is similar with the exception of the ultimate decline of mass-, object- and money-society, and the rise of Caesarism marking the death of an old and the birth of a new Culture.

The functional unity of the object and the mass are epitomized for Spengler in the machine. Here the conspiracy or revenge of the inferiority finds its means and purest expression :

The lord of the World is becoming the slave of the Machine, which is forcing him - forcing us all, whether we are aware of it or not - to follow its course. The victor, crashed, is dragged to death by the team. (Spengler 1932: 90-91)

This is what makes Spengler's vision more unified, in this particular respect, than Simmel's or at least better articulated. For Simmel is treating the transition from the domination of the mass to the domination of the objects as a qualitative transition to a different phase whereas Spengler treats the two as the different sides of the same coin. If one looks at his analysis of the Machine as a Faustian symbol it is evident that Spengler's analysis - that must have struck people as odd at that time - possesses a rare insight that cannot but be verified in modern civilization. Most of the German thinkers at that time were hostile or at least sceptical towards the concept of mechanization for reasons that I have already outlined. With Spengler the reduction of the individual to a simple automaton - which responds accordingly to artificially constructed mental or physical stimuli - confirms the globalization of this function. With it "the world has entered a phase of dangerous over-tension"²⁹³ with the ecological implications and disasters that Spengler anticipated and we all experience today.

The prominence of technology as a form of life has been reinforced by its coalition with the industry, economics and politics. The diffusion of science as the theoretical framework of the technological implementation of its hypotheses to public life under the pretext of the improvement of the quality of life is supported by political channels for obvious reasons : contemporary politics - State power - is useless without technology. Issues of technology (military power, industrial growth, growing intervention to the environment, the technological organization of the citizen's everyday life etc) have become

²⁹³ *ibid.*: 93

synonymous to issues of endogenous political achievement and benefits as well as exogenous issues such as territorial expansion. The latter theme is addressed by Spengler who sees increase of population as the cause for further conflicts. With it comes an intensification of fragmentation and creation of borders. For Spengler borders signify "the limits of one's own power"²⁹⁴ and their existence which really signifies and generates the desire to be transcended instigates the destructive tendencies of the "Will-to-Power". The European and North-American civilizations being undoubtedly the most powerful have already engaged themselves in imperialism of all kinds : political, economic, military but above all, technological. Foreign policy becomes intertwined and totally dependent on the appropriation and creation of foreign markets, making colonization central to the oil factor.²⁹⁵ This is the "treason to technics" or in a more timely formulation :

The famous "dissemination of industry" set in, motivated by the idea of getting bigger profits by bringing production into the marketing area. And so, in place of the export of finished products exclusively, they ["white" peoples] began an export of secrets, processes, methods, engineers, and organizers. (Spengler 1932: 101)

Here Spengler echoes Simmel's notion of the subjugation of the individual in the process of production. The self-destruction in this respect of the Faustian will-to-power is caused by the attempt to proselytize other peoples, races or tribes to the technics of the West. By imposing the purely causal, rational way of thought by means of technology and general tactics of living (Christian religion, for example) on alien peoples, the West and its constructs will collapse through two ways one of which we already experience : firstly, by the exhaustion of the creative power of Faustian forms, the new pseudo-forms regurgiating by means of *collage* old ones, and secondly, by the revenge²⁹⁶ of the other races on Western peoples through a more adequate - economically and technologically - appropriation of the means they were given (Japan).

In adumbrating the altered state of current civilization in the context of technological refinement Spengler along with his criticisms proceeds with observations of astonishing accuracy. Anticipating the issues of world-system economy and globalization as they are articulated by modern thinkers (Wallerstein, Robertson), Spengler announces the centrality of technics in breaking down the spatio-temporal barriers between continents:

A will-to-power which laughs at all bounds of time and space, which indeed regards the boundless and endless as its specific target,

²⁹⁴ *ibid.*: 70

²⁹⁵ Spengler (1934: 49)

²⁹⁶ Spengler (1932: 103)

subjects whole continents to itself, embraces the world in the network of its form of communication and intercourse, and transforms it by the force of its practical energy and the gigantic power of its technical processes. (Spengler 1932: 79)

Recalling Marinetti's reverence for technological speed as the means which transcends time and space, but in a manner consistent with the *Kulturpessimismus* of the times, Spengler extends this position and stresses the dislocation of technics from "life's servant" to "life's tyrant". He refers to the asphyxia of the Faustian will which feels suffocated within the periphery of the earth and seeks a release, a transcendence. He talks about man "in the universe of space amongst the stars" and about the unforeseeable condensation of forces and energies "to a focus to obey the hand of a child".²⁹⁷ In what is not simply an anticipation of computerized society but also of the radical change we are experiencing today namely from "technics" to "informatics", Spengler concludes his description of the most powerful Faustian symbol :

And these machines become in their forms less and ever less human, more ascetic, mystic, esoteric. They weave the earth over with an infinite web of subtle forces, currents and tensions. Their bodies become ever more and more immaterial, ever less noisy. The wheels, rollers, and levers are vocal no more. All that matters withdraws itself into the interior. Man has felt the machine to be devilish, and rightly. It signifies in the eyes of the believer the deposition of God. It delivers sacred Causality over to man and by him, with a sort of foreseeing omniscience is set in motion, silent and irresistible. (Spengler 1928: 503-504)

It is not very often that the consequences of man's technological development are treated with such awesome reverence and contempt at the same time. Mostly, they are taken for granted as necessary and expected steps of humanity's progress ("humanity" and "progress" compose the fictions of the greatest fraud in the modern world) as creations of the experts for the welfare of the citizens. It is no accident that the experts - natural scientists, engineers, technocrats in general as well as their counterparts, business administrators - are worshipped or revered in the metropolis. For the city-dweller knows only the macrocosmos through the machines and the media. Even his desire to encounter other places and to travel²⁹⁸ is a false need and a counter-reaction to the oppressive emptiness that characterizes the modern city. It is pure escapism and bears no genuine interest whatsoever. The city-dweller impressed by the diversity of other world-views but lacking in will so to abandon his artificial macrocosmos, attempts to imitate them in

²⁹⁷ Spengler (1928 : 503)

²⁹⁸ Simmel (1978 : 484)

usually superficial ways: occultism, asceticism, vegetarianism etc. He bears either a contemptuous attitude towards the countryside or a pseudo-romantic one. Both, though, are reactions to his own inability to attain a foundation for his existence, an existence shattered by a circus of plethoric stimuli. The city-dweller is a captive animal since he is never willing to escape from the dominant forms of life - which grew and flourished with all their utility in the village - but since their utility is lost within the city he resorts to a pseudo-criticism of them and escapes to "catchwords" such as socialism, liberalism, or anarchism. Before though I look at Simmel's and Spengler's portrayal of the modern urban man - the monster of money and technology - it is necessary to turn the discussion briefly to their notions of "tragedy" and "destiny". Here the two thinkers are ever more closely to each other than before.

b) Tragedy as the Destiny of Culture (Simmel) or Destiny as the Tragedy of Civilization (Spengler) :

It is true that the moral imperative that characterizes Simmel's and Spengler's visions of contemporary culture differs. As I have shown schematically in a previous section the former embraces contradiction as the *perpetuum mobile* of social life while the latter extols the end of Civilization and longs for the dawn of a new Culture. The notions they use in order to define their interpretations reflect the spirit of their analyses : Simmel uses "tragedy" in order to convey contradiction, while Spengler introduces "destiny" as the last stage that awaits every Culture.

In this section I shall outline briefly the nature and precise rapport of these two concepts. Despite the apparent divergence in the outcome these concepts generate, it seems that they bear close relevance to each other. Immanent in Simmel's "tragedy" is an acute fatalistic element ; in Spengler's fatalism on the other hand, one discerns markedly a tragic tone that accompanies the notion of "destiny". For Spengler the notion of destiny is juxtaposed with the notion of causality and it often reaches its climactic form when he discusses the growth and domination of technics. For Simmel "tragedy" is connected only implicitly to technology ; it rather embraces the whole of modern life, it is primarily the consequence of money and it contains a strong vitalistic element. In fact the concept of "tragedy" in Simmel can only be adequately represented through a vitalistic perspective.

The contradictory nature of "tragedy" derives in one sense from the foundational character of Simmel's metaphysics. Life is made the center of the existence of the modern individual whose being, as Simmel has demonstrated through his writings on culture, is in a precarious balance between his subjectivity and the objectivity of culture. Simmel's vitalism resides on the use of contradiction: life as such is formless yet it manifests itself as form, and life seeks to transcend its own creations by destroying them and creating the conditions for the conception and development of new forms. Epigrammatically, the

contradiction in Simmel's idea of life is consciously affirmed as the irreconcilable conflict between life's being (*more-life*) and life's understanding of its own being (*more-than-life*). The co-existence of opposing elements in life is not a new assertion but it permeates Simmel's thought. For example, in summarizing his world-view as epistemology, Simmel holds that man's perception of reality is contradictory (absolute and relative) only because reality itself is contradictory (constancy and flux).²⁹⁹ Similarly, life contains both creative and destructive elements. Here Simmel hints at the ideas that would later manifest themselves in Spengler's fatalism. The "tragic" is for Simmel the embodiment of "a destiny which is oriented in a destructive way against the will-to-life of an existence, against its nature, its direction and its value".³⁰⁰ Destiny and fate are congenital to tragedy and the element of contradiction is enhanced by the fact that "in the tragic, there is a profound harmony between the positive element in man and that which destroys this positive element".³⁰¹ Moreover, Simmel sees in tragedy "a universal human destiny that realizes itself in individual characters".³⁰² In applying these ideas from the realm of arts to that of social life - the aesthetic depiction of reality is here uncontested - Simmel is led to the cultural schism that defines modern man : the shift of his existence from subjective to objective life. Tragedy is of an ontic essence and it manifests itself

[...] when the destructive forces directed against some being spring forth from the deepest levels of this very being ; or when its destruction has been initiated in itself, and forms the logical development of the very structure by which a being has built its own positive form. (Simmel 1968: 43)

In operating with Hegelian means, Simmel traces the birth of tragedy in the mutually opposing relationship between subject and object. In fact, he refers in most cases to the "subjective and objective spirit" as the two areas of life that culture intersects. The tension between them acquires its most extreme form in modern culture. Fragmentation, over-specialization and in general, the uncritical quest for analytical dissection of things and processes into causal relations have increased the channels of action and expression of the subjective spirit, but in a negative sense since this plurality hinders the full actualization (objectification) of the individual's potential. This abundance of channels regarding access to culture has caused the modern age to focus to a large extent to the technique of the acquisition of particular skills or knowledge within a field but at the same time to

²⁹⁹ Ibid.: 511

³⁰⁰ Simmel (1990b[1923] : 295) {My translation}

³⁰¹ Ibid.: 296 {My translation}

³⁰² *ibid.* {My translation}

disregard general cultivation of the individual. Knowledge has now become particularized instead of spherical. Even the demand for synthesis and reconciliation of this duality is problematic. Simmel sees it as paradoxical and tragic since the realm of cultural constructs becomes increasingly objectified, following its own immanent laws ; despite the fact that they are products of the subjective spirit, they confront man as independent entities that have to be accepted, most often, unconditionally since the individual lacks the capacity of multiple scrutiny (atrophy of subjective culture versus hypertrophy of objective culture). The modern individual has reached a stage where he either submits to the demands of his specialized interest completely, therefore unconsciously elevating his field from its relative character to absolute significance, or he deludes himself by attempting to return to the multi-disciplinary state of the cultivated man of previous decades or centuries. In fact in the latter case what can be achieved is a level of basic knowledge of various cultural realms. This divergence becomes more and more intense and it is according to Simmel the measuring rod for the appraisal of a culture :

The entire life-style of a community depends upon the relationship between the objectified culture and the culture of its subjects. (Simmel 1978: 453)

In Spengler we see the same idea :

The Faustian, west-European Culture is *probably* not the last, but *certainly* it is the most powerful, the most passionate, and - owing to the inward conflict between its comprehensive intellectuality and its profound spiritual disharmony - the most tragic of them all. (Spengler 1932: 78)

These thoughts can be applied to the state of modern Western societies. In highly modernized countries one observes a cultural dissonance where the individual is bombarded with communicative devices but the implementation of these means has the opposite effect. For example, in linguistic usage despite the continuous refinement of language, its application to everyday life has become increasingly simplified.³⁰³ This is just one of the many incidents of the objectification of spirit and the "destructive" effects that accompany it. It is the destiny of the creative being to be blocked by its own creativity as soon as this is objectified and it acquires wider social dimensions ; the realization of this extended social colouration of the subjective spirit seems to be possible only through the transformation of means onto ends in purposive activity. These elements of destiny and fate are palpable in Simmel :

³⁰³ Simmel (1978 : 448)The psychological implications of this conflict are seen by Simmel as feelings of "inadequacy and helplessness" which cause the individual to search for inner satisfaction in alternatives that are either antiquated or transcend the boundaries of his culture. (Simmel, 1968 : 44)

[...] cultural contents are bound to follow a logic which eventually is independent of their *cultural purpose* ³⁰⁴, and which continuously leads them away from it. The situation is tragic : even in its first moments of existence, culture carries something within itself which, as if by an intrinsic fate, is determined to block, to burden, to obscure and divide its innermost purpose, the transition of the soul from its incomplete to its complete state. (Simmel 1968: 46)

Here therefore we confront "tragedy as the destiny of culture" ; tragedy is a fateful event that inheres in the life-process itself. But it is tragedy that is rendered as the foundational concept in Simmel's theory of culture and not destiny. Life and tragedy are in a sense synonymous when it comes to the element of contradiction they contain but also pertaining to the fact that life manifests itself in tragic form.

With Spengler this vitalistic approach is similar. The fact that Spengler starts from the notion of destiny may influence his general conclusions but the description of modern culture is on the same line as Simmel's. Both thinkers use "tragedy" and "destiny" as simply different axes of the same problem ; their descriptions are on the same plane and their solutions are in more consonance than previously assumed.

For both thinkers in the purely metaphysical and vitalistic sense, fate is an instrument of life or rather its quintessence. ³⁰⁵ Again, contradiction is the characteristic feature of tragedy ; the greater the contradiction, the greater the tragedy. Spengler attaches the tragic element to Time (seen here as Life). It is the tragedy *as* duration that characterizes the Western civilization and it derives from the profound conflict inherent in the Faustian Culture which has simultaneously "passionately affirmed" and "passionately denied, Time".³⁰⁶ Spengler detects the manifestations of the cosmic tragedy of man on various levels. In all of them, and unlike Simmel who sees tragic oppositions as contradictions, Spengler interprets an element of struggle that always reflects the will-to-

³⁰⁴ The general phenomenon of the loss of purpose, in the sense of immediate and pure needs, is typified, for Spengler by the machine which "by its multiplication and refinement, is the end defeating its own purpose" (Spengler, 1932 : 95), or as Simmel would say the triumph of the complexity of means over the initial ends.

³⁰⁵ For Simmel, "the destiny of life" means "to contain its future in its present in a special form which exists only in the life process". (Simmel, 1968 : 28). Analogous is the case with Spengler: we ought to regard "Life (our name for the form in which the actualizing of the possible is accomplished) as directed, irrevocable in every line, fate-laden". (Spengler, 1926 : 117). In looking at these formulations through the perspective of cultural critique, one sees the destiny/fate of modern life as dealing with dead forms, their creativity being exhausted. However, both thinkers through their Goethian background see *change* as the "tragic" and "destined" mode of life. Creativity is not an invalid category neither is action. They are ends-in-themselves. Without birth and creation the very notions of fate and tragedy would be meaningless. Destiny and tragedy are notions that characterize the end awaiting every creator and thing-created. Simmel sees it implicitly, Spengler explicitly, but both are in general consistency.

³⁰⁶ Spengler (1926 : 130)

power. For example, and at the foundational level of his thought, he sees the battle between man and nature as tragic. Tragedy and destiny reach here a perfect reconciliation :

This is the beginning of man's *tragedy* - for Nature is the stronger of the two. Man remains dependent on her, for in spite of everything she embraces him, like all else, within herself [...] The fight against Nature is hopeless and yet - it will be fought out to the bitter end. (Spengler 1932: 44-45)

The analogy between Spengler's Nature and Simmel's Life is here obvious. Both are ascribed superior status to their creations and they are declared final victors over the rebellion of matter, intelligence, even man's will-to-power. The latter is not infallible and omnipotent and the decline of the West is the outcome of its - predestined - mistakes.³⁰⁷ But along with these, reification appears as the most tragic element of life : from the realm of Nature, Man appears as an independent and objective being ; his existence overshadows every other form of life and appears as an end in itself. But Man suffers the same fate : whatever grew out of his creativity confronts him with the same way that he confronts nature ; the tragedy refers to the sequence : nature as captive of man, man as captive of objects. The latter phase is articulated in a Simmelian form by Spengler as follows :

But it is the tragedy of the time that this unfettered human thought can no longer grasp its own consequences. (Spengler 1932: 93)

Fundamentally, this is the fatalistic idea that defines Spengler's notion of destiny and it gives it a tragic character. Reification and objectification define tragedy and destiny *per se*; for Simmel, life's self-transcendence is the tragic moment (where life fulfills itself through its opposite) while for Spengler life's fulfillment or destiny is death. In both cases what is guaranteed is the recurrence of the same event. Simmel reads this as tragic, Spengler as fateful. For the latter, "destiny as the tragedy of culture" denotes simply the tragic inevitability of the destruction of every thing-created. A destruction that springs from the inner (creative) energies of this very being. Every creation means destruction; this contradiction is the tragic fact for both thinkers.

c) Metropolis, Megalopolis and Money :

The amphitheatre for the staging of the Western drama, is built in modern culture within the confines of the city. The city is for both Simmel and Spengler the context for the materialization and expression of modern life ; there, money and technics attest to the crisis (Simmel) and the decline (Spengler) of culture. This crisis is affirmed as the

³⁰⁷ Spengler (1932 : 100-101)

intellectualization and rationalization of all areas of life which have acquired their new meaning as city-life. This comprehensive elimination of non-rational elements from life is felt in all areas of urban culture : from the psychological constellation of the city-dweller to the city's grand-institutional composition. Despite the overlapping of these issues in both thinkers, the former aspect is examined thoroughly by Simmel while the latter is analyzed by Spengler. Both interpretations take place within the *Gemeinschaft - Gesellschaft* opposition : it is thus no accident that they bear close relevance to each other. Let us examine therefore the compatibility of these two appraisals of modern life.

The Simmelian way of approaching the problem, implies the loss of a uniform way of life and its replacement by a fragmented mode of existence that is the outcome of several factors. Advanced money economy and technology - with all its negative implications I have outlined so far - constitute one factor. The prevalence of mass ideals and the downward leveling process that is the concomitant of their diffusion to the public, may be another. What also may account for the lack of a substantive paradigm in modern urban life is the physical and intellectual expansion of the boundaries of the city : the incorporation and dissemination of information that transcends the life-world of the city-dweller and yet is present *as* image in his daily life-course testifies to this tendency unique in the metropolis and megalopolis. To isolate any of these factors as central would result to a truncated picture of today's city-life. Simmel was truly the first figure that focused on the interconnection of these elements and how they manifest in psychological and sociological form in modern culture.

If we are to trace though a starting-point in this complex issue, then the advance of money economy and the symbolic and functional significance of money may be the appropriate one. Money is, according to Simmel, one of the purest form of objectified social life. It corresponds to the reification of the essence of social conduct, namely exchange. Exchange is nothing other than a form of interaction. Money acquires its special character as function through the concept of exchange. Consequently, "money is the reification of exchange among people, the embodiment of a pure function".³⁰⁸ Reification though is nothing more than a process of abstraction : certain elements of reality achieve autonomy and enter a new and independent nomological realm. Money is again the vehicle for exchangeability but in order to carry out this function it turns "value into a substance" it objectifies it, and it deals with "the value of things without the things themselves".³⁰⁹ In essence, this abstract character of value through the concept of money

³⁰⁸ Simmel (1978 : 176)

³⁰⁹ Ibid.: 121

"expresses nothing but the relativity of things that constitute value."³¹⁰ Looking back at the transition of means to ends, we can see how the same rationale applies to the objective, indifferent character of money : its elevation onto an end in itself is signified by the parallel reduction "of its quality" which now "consists exclusively in its quantity".³¹¹ We see that the same tendency occurs in the world of reified technics where the value of information resides on its quantity and number. The implication of this is that for both objects and information (which is nothing other than objectified knowledge in compressed form), their qualitative coloration is lost amidst their mass. This wholly new trend of the quantitative - numerical representation of values and modes of conduct leads to the *tragic* fact of modern life : the downward levelling process where "the uniform convertibility" of the "most heterogeneous elements into money"³¹² reaches its peak. Since money is the means in the teleological sequence of ends that permeates all other areas of life - in terms of being a mediator between values - it is often mistaken as the absolute end. Modern vocational motivation is geared precisely towards this fact. Other factors such as prestige or cultural value of a profession have either been marginalised by money or they have been translated into purely monetary terms. It is because money has transcended its own function as mediator between values and has presented itself as a value among values - and since all values have a money equivalent, therefore logically, money *is* the superior value - that it is often seen as the omnipotent force of our times. It literally, has replaced God.

In Spengler we hear exactly the same themes.³¹³ In his chapter on "Money" we find interesting similarities with Simmel's findings on the subject, although they are articulated here in less insightful way. Spengler recognizes as well, the significance of money as function and the transition from goods to wares or commodities and the new monetary mentality. He also points to the re-appraisal of issues of power as the result of money and wealth,³¹⁴ and to the fact that a new class has blossomed aside of the producers and consumers, out of the money economy : that of the "middleman" ³¹⁵, a mediator, or a businessman in contemporary terminology. For Spengler as for Simmel,

³¹⁰ *ibid.*

³¹¹ *ibid.*: 259

³¹² Simmel (1991 [1896] : 24)

³¹³ Robert Nisbet is, to my knowledge, the first to have hinted to the sociological similarities between Simmel and Spengler on money. (Nisbet, 1966 : 100). Roland Robertson recently, has drawn a loose parallel between Simmel and Spengler, regarding the former's influence on the latter's description of modernity. (Robertson 1992: 152).

³¹⁴ Spengler (1928 : 485)

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 483

the essence of money resides on its quantitative character :

[Money] is turned into *force* , and its quantity determines the intensity of its working influence. (Spengler 1928: 460)

Money, seen from this angle makes its quantitative role an instrument of power. This is something that Spengler affirms in the most unequivocal way : "money aims at mobilising *all* things".³¹⁶ In other words, money is the only means in which all aspects of the wider political life of man can be translated to ("financial energy"). This vitalistic remark which often hints to money's fluidity *as* life, is also present in Simmel. Money, as a concept that is mobile, reflects the spirit of modernity in its most accurate form and bears close relevance to the dissolution of all "solid, substantial and stable form into a state of development, movement and instability".³¹⁷ It is also perhaps in this sense that Spengler's urban notion of freedom - "freedom *from* something" - bears some relevance to Simmel's conception of monetary freedom from the "unifying bonds"³¹⁸ of "objects of possession".³¹⁹

On a smaller scale, Simmel examines the implications of money economy for the individual by looking at particular instances of metropolitan life where money proves detrimental for the psychological constitution of man. Prostitution, for example, is seen as the relationship where both partners' most intimate possession in relation to individuality is degraded into a monetary transaction. It is often - such as in the case of the Expressionist painting of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Otto Dix - that prostitution is used in order to convey alienation, distance and moral degradation through physical ugliness ; in all cases it is interpreted as such within the context of the metropolis.³²⁰ The psychological consequences of those types of interaction are epitomized in feelings such as greed, avarice, extravagance, cynicism or the blasé attitude. The underlying factor for the intensification of these psychological traits is traced by Simmel on the subversion of the

³¹⁶ *ibid.*: 485

³¹⁷ Simmel (1991 [1896] : 29)

³¹⁸ Spengler (1928 : 413) He sees this type of freedom in the context of politics as freedom from dynastic bonds of government and as usually manifesting itself as republicanism. The analogy with economy and property is obvious and I feel it can plausibly sustained. Hence Spengler's subsequent equation of money and political power via democracy (*ibid.*: 485).

³¹⁹ Simmel (1978 : 354)

³²⁰ The locale of the metropolis has been for both artists the most appropriate locale for their critique of civilization. The emphasis is on the artificial character of modern existence along with its alienating effects. Dix points to these effects in a psychologically transparent way where the urban existence is considerably darkened in relation to Kirchner's earlier depiction of it. In Dix we get the pictorial representation of the urban man's exposure to a variety of stimuli such that Simmel had described (Karcher 1987 : 56). Yet the existential implication of modernity that Dix portrays is closer to Nietzsche's and Spengler's spiritual and cultural nihilism.

"means-ends" sequence and the reduction of everyday activity via money - and according to Spengler, technics as well - to means ; the psychological function of means for the individual is identified "in the fact of 'stimulation' as such".³²¹ It is perhaps better to refrain from addressing in detail Simmel's thoughts on the psychological effects of money since, firstly they have been thoroughly expounded by other scholars, and secondly they bear little relevance to Spengler who explored the consequences of money on a larger scale.

The triumph of advanced technics and advanced money economy share amongst other things, the same physical context : the city. In both thinkers' description of modern life, the city plays the central role in enclosing within its periphery all the aspects that are the products of modernity. The city being itself a genuine feature of modernity displaces in its full force the transition of life from the peasant's earth-bound microkosmos to the city-dweller's extended macrokosmos. With Simmel we observe with clarity the details of the first phase of this transition where the new life-world that emerges through the growing division of labour, creates new life-conditions and new life-categories for responding to it. Its function is to integrate the available elements into a new system. Spengler on the other hand is interested primarily on the second phase of this process where the city devours other life-forms and presents itself as not the dominant, but the *only* context for the unfolding of modern life. Here, the city seeks to liquidate the peasant form of life - for example, through technology and petty-politics - by presenting itself in *ideal* terms which the peasant, or non-urban man *has* to adopt. We deal again here with a blunt exercise of the Faustian will-to-power by *one* type of man on another. The character of this process is evident in the choice of terms that both thinkers used in order to approach the peculiar character of the city ; none of them wrote about the city as such. Simmel used the term "metropolis" and Spengler resorted to the term "megalopolis". This is not simply a matter of a fancy terminological choice by the two philosophers. It denotes a qualitative distinction, which despite the intersection of the two definitions, can be plausibly sustained precisely because it delineates the subtle boundaries of the two process-phases I have just identified.

In order to reach the kernel of Simmel's theory of metropolis, I ought to return briefly to its psychological basis : the plethora of stimuli in the city. With this quantitative change, man also experiences a qualitative change. In order to be able to deal with those stimuli it is necessary to respond at a very superficial and intellectual level, that is, avoid emotional attachment. For this reason,

³²¹ Ibid.: 257

Intellectuality is thus seen to preserve subjective life against the overwhelming power of metropolitan life, and intellectuality branches out in many directions and is integrated with numerous discrete phenomena. (Simmel 1950: 411)

Growth of the intellectual way of perception may be seen as a defence mechanism. However, this defensive nature of intellectuality and logical thinking undergoes the same process as other means within the metropolis. Intellect, from a means to protect the emotional world of the individual, is elevated onto the only mode of life suppressing emotion as a way of responding to modern situations. Its apogee is epitomized by rationalization and calculability. The former refers to organization in space and the latter to organization in time. Rationalization is the distribution and arrangement of processes into a logical, systematic taxonomy ; it places the process-as-thing beside similar objectifications of spirit or of life. In other words, it arranges them in space, irrespective of time. In the metropolis rationalization is evident in every fact of life : from the topographical structure of the city (heterogeneous elements such as populations, products, spheres of culture, allocated according to sectors) to the mental and behavioral patterns that are prescribed by its logical system of rules (codes of daily interaction that usually contribute to the preservation of space such as civilized conduct or manners). Calculability on the other hand, refers to the intellectual response to time. Metropolitan man seeks to organize time, to introduce "a chronology of becoming" as Spengler says³²², perhaps in another attempt to provide a psychological, albeit unconscious, barrier between the numerous stimuli and his inner world. Calculability prevents man from coming to real and original contact with an increasing number of stimuli. This is an argument that extends a Simmelian position and conforms to his idea of the preponderance of means. For Simmel, the cause of the rise of the calculating spirit in the metropolis lies in purely practical purposes : to systematize the chaotic reality of different stimuli that surround man; this I call the low boundary of civic man's existence. Man raises himself above the mass of impressions. It seems though that calculability operates at another level as well : that of keeping man's existence and mode of life within an already tried and functional level of conduct. This is achieved only through calculability's second defence function which is to secure and close-off this pattern of behavior. This may become so stringent that even with a laxity of stimuli, the individual would still conform to the previous pattern as if he was still dealing with the massive influx of impressions ; this, I call the upper boundary of man's existence in the metropolis. This aspect is hinted by Simmel rather than being explicitly stated :

³²² Spengler (1926 : 134)

Punctuality, calculability, exactness are forced upon life by the complexity and extension of metropolitan existence [. . .] These traits must also color the contents of life and favor the exclusion of those irrational, instinctive, sovereign traits and impulses which aim at determining the mode of life from within, instead of receiving the general and precisely schematized form of life from without. (Simmel 1950: 413)

This quotation is important not only because it describes the major tendency of modern life but also because it reintroduces covertly the vitalistic element. It is therefore of some significance that Simmel attaches to instinct and irrationality a sovereign character. In a Nietzschean manner he laments the lack of "sovereign types of personality" that are guided by "irrational impulses", in the metropolis. The will-to-power that had been connected previously with the functional unity of instinct and intelligence has now given way to its materialist version namely, money and reified technics. In a general sense it refers to the aim of natural sciences applied to society : to demonstrate the social processes within a precise, numerical framework. The leap from segmentation and allocation of activities in concrete time-limits, to their numerical representation is facilitated by the money economy. For Simmel, as for Spengler when history is concerned, the reduction of the social processes "into an arithmetic problem" represented by "mathematical formulas", is a pattern set up by natural scientific discourse.³²³ This severe reduction of content to form has negative consequences for the individual. Regarding freedom, Simmel's views are held to be ambiguous. He, generally, holds that metropolitan man is free in the sense of having ceased to be dominated by ascribed relationships. The close physical proximity between people in the metropolis allows no room for mental or emotional closeness as well. Usually, it is the latter realm that resorts into solitude and reveals itself only occasionally. Differentiation implies elasticity of movement and enhancement of personal development in terms of choice. Objectification also, is here closely tied with individual freedom. In a world of objectified products the individual has access to them without resorting to antagonism or conflict. Mass consumption has turned this into an indisputable dictum of the metropolitan existence. However, the devaluation of products and their application in trivial processes, points to the opposite direction. In applying Simmel's prime definition of freedom, we can see how it fits together with the overall scheme of modern society. For Simmel, the notion of freedom is inextricably linked with its opposite, namely, bondage. In short, what man calls freedom is "a change of obligations", where the release from the previous obligation creates the illusion of total release whereas

³²³ Simmel (1950 : 412)

in fact, the individual is being introduced into a new form of bondage.³²⁴ The same applies to city-life. The freedom to associate with things via anonymity is illusory. It is only freedom *as* a different form of bondage. Since man is unable to absorb to a relatively profound degree the contents of the cultural products available to him, he is able to achieve a familiarity with them only superficially. But so can thousands of other individuals in the same metropolitan locale. Freedom as distinction is rare in the city despite the illusion of plurality. Specialization dissolves the criteria for evaluation and creates a plurality of individuals and products where every entity is, simplistically stated, as good or as bad as every other entity. This is how scepticism, agnosticism and solipsism emerge as the dominant attitudes towards knowledge. Each of them combine the features of the half-educated bourgeois, in a unity of arrogance and cowardice. Scepticism denotes the inability of the city-dweller to attach significance to a set of ideas or stimuli and work from that. Agnosticism is the manifestation of the city-dweller's fear and cowardice during his inability to abandon the remnants and residues of old, and in the past meaningful forms ; religion and materialism come into close contact here and the outcome is of the most pretentious nature. In agnosticism the most spurious aspects of city-thought come to the fore as the artificial (and convenient) wedlock of religion and pragmatism. Finally, with modern solipsism the drama of the metropolitan man is fulfilled. With solipsism, scepticism is translated into laziness and the most abominable of all human feelings such as arrogance, is brought once more to the surface. Here, the city-dweller refuses to accept the Socratic virtue of modesty and spasmodically elevates either his petty-experience as the fortress through which knowledge cannot penetrate, or he resorts to his specialized craft or science and elevates it from its relative existence to absolute and timely significance. Freedom is the creation of new forms but in the metropolis we only get a rumination of old ones. It is a form of urban necrophilia where we are now concerned with the adornment and stylization of dead forms, a profane panmixia of whatever belongs to the past in terms of its creative content. We can truly ossify its form and treasure it forever, but the content, and the energy have ceased and the spirit has died out. Freedom to do everything means simply hindrance to create something of substance. Freedom is a relational concept and one cannot be free if his activity is of the same sort as others'. There is thus no conception of mass freedom. Freedom implies action, and action implies competition and differentiation which is meaningful only as domination : to ascend in the pyramid of life. Freedom for some, means necessarily, domination for others. In the city, freedom in the sense of effective action is the privilege of the few. The plurality is captive of the forms generated by the few : the media (television or the press) is an appropriate example, the

³²⁴ Simmel (1978 : 283)

occupational structure is another. I shall return to these ideas in due course, especially in relation to practical politics ; however, it seemed necessary to reach once more the notion of will-to-power in relation to metropolitan conceptions of freedom that have risen as a consequence of money and urban life. These are the notions implicit in Simmel, but only turned into a system with Spengler.

I reach now the most important feature of metropolis, its quintessence so to speak. The plethoric character of the city is the outcome of the aggregation of differentiated entities. But the city is greedy by its very nature ; it asks for more population and more stimuli to sustain it. It develops intricate and subtle means to provide these stimuli from all continents and lands and presents them as if they are in direct propinquity. As if operating with magnetic force, it draws the spirit of alien peoples and places within its periphery and through money it turns it into a commodity. This extension of the city - not in the physical sense - was pointed at by both Simmel and Spengler. In highlighting the qualitative change that occurred quantitatively with the transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* , Simmel epitomizes its character as follows :

The most significant characteristic of the metropolis is the functional extension beyond its physical boundaries [. . .] Man does not end with the limits of his body or the area comprising his immediate activity. Rather is the range of the person constituted by the sum of effects emanating from him temporally and spatially. In the same way, a city consists of its total effects which extend beyond its immediate confines. Only this range is the city's actual extent in which its existence is expressed. (Simmel 1950: 419)

The city's transcendence of its geographic limits is a fact solely attributed to technology. Only through technology can metropolitan imperialism accumulate spiritual capital to sustain its subjects. The "hypertrophy of objective culture - atrophy of individual culture"³²⁵ relationship, achieves by these means its purest expression. Here, the contradiction of freedom in the sense which Simmel identifies early on in his essay on 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' becomes apparent :

On the one hand, life is made infinitely easy for the personality in that stimulations, interests, uses of time and consciousness are offered to it from all sides [. . .] On the other hand, however, life is composed more and more of these impersonal contents and offerings which tend to displace the genuine personal colorations and incomparabilities. (Simmel 1950: 422)

Here, Simmel elevates modern life onto a contradictory state, where it oscillates between

³²⁵ Simmel (1950 : 422)

two antithetical poles. This is symptomatic of the incorporation of alien perspectives into objective culture and their invasion into the microkosmos of the city-dweller. The spiritual extension of the city is given grand historical proportions with Spengler and it clearly demonstrates the Faustian (urban) will-to-power. The city is at the centre of his theory and it provides the specific reference point for the unfolding of the Western tragedy. In defining the capital city, he writes :

This [. . .] is that city whose spirit, with its methods, aims, and decisions of policy and economics, dominates the land. The land with its people is for this controlling spirit a tool and an object [. . .] [The] country-dweller [. . .] moves into the City, not perhaps in the body, but certainly in the spirit. (Spengler 1928: 95)

By means of populist politics and their tool, the press, the city-spirit removes the nobility of the peasantry and transforms it into an even more vulgar and contemptuous entity than the bourgeois city-dweller. The latter appears now as a genuine product of his locale, whereas the mentally urbanized peasant appears as the vanquished expression of an inferior proto-culture : he provides the ground for the legitimation of city-culture. It is thus no accident that a vast number of peoples in the city trace their immediate background and roots to the town or the village. Usually, only a very small percentage is able to claim genuine city-roots. In essence, whatever is genuine belongs to the kind of peasant who remains ascetic and immune to the urban spirit. The fragmentation of culture starts precisely at this point : as the extension of the city's functionality. Its spirit in a process of panmixia and debasement conforms to the compression of too many heterogeneous members together :

In the great cities, [...] a mass of rootless fragments of population stands outside all social linkages. [...] Elements drawn from all classes and conditions belong to it instinctively. . . [...] Their power is far in excess of their numbers [...] (Spengler 1928: 399-400)

Tracing this inverse process to its own roots, it is necessary to return to Spengler's description of concentrated life in the city. Only then, will his relationship to Simmel be fully illuminated.

As we have seen, Simmel although at the heart of the transition between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* restricted his comparative analysis to the dissection of the latter's composition, to the extent that the juxtaposition to the former comes only rarely into the picture except perhaps in his analysis of money. Even then, with Simmel trying to maintain moderate tones, the immanent crisis is immediately felt. Spengler elicits the character of this tension and turns it into a symptom - experienced in previous centuries in other countries - of a phase that all mature Cultures shall undergo. This process is simple

but clearly manifest in historical and social terms. The theme or prime-symbol that characterizes every genuine Culture "rises out of the pre-urban country-side, is carried through in the cities of art and intellect, and closes with a finale of materialism in the world-cities".³²⁶ The growth of the latter is denoted precisely by its name : world-city or the extension of metropolis to megalopolis. What we call History as a cumulative process is no more than city-history, the outline and evaluation of the city's domination of other life-forms and the objectification that has evolved within its confines. Megalopolitan perception is of a totalitarian nature. Whatever it cannot comprehend it liquidates : this is the fate of the peasant as it is the fate in a macrocosmic level, of whole nations or even continents whose life-courses are either conquered by blunt force or first lured by money and then integrated in pacified form into the Western hemisphere.

At the heart of all this lies the prevalence of intellect and of the liberal spirit. Spengler says that the "megalopolis is 'free' intellect" : this intellect "upsets thrones and limits old rights in the name of reason and above all in the name of 'the People'"³²⁷, that is the city-dwellers. With the eradication of old forms of political and social conduct, modern urban man eliminates Time. The growth and development of these forms collapses under the banner of reason or the mass and the conception of time *as* experience collapses alongside it. Acceleration brings about simplification and the boundaries between age-groups are approaching each other with geometric progress. Time ceases to exist as soon as a type of experience becomes uniformly accessible to the mass. Time is now meaningless as development and it exists as routine : hence the bombardment of stimuli that Simmel had identified decades ago, hence the blasé attitude, hence modern cynicism. Hence Spengler's reference to Nietzsche on the issue of values :

Transvaluation of all values is the most fundamental character of every civilization. For it is the beginning of a Civilization that it remoulds all the forms of the Culture that went before, understands them otherwise, practices them in a different way. It begets no more, but only reinterprets, and herein lies the negativeness common to all periods of this character. (Spengler 1926: 351)

In fact, this means nothing else than a devaluation of old forms. It occurs in multi-form levels. From art and science to religion and work, the richness of the living organism has been reduced to the monotonous predictability of a lifeless organon. Every cultural form has become devoid of any organic utility and simply exists *as* form alienated from life-experience. This trend has also been detected through the acute crisis in religious form.

³²⁶ Spengler (1928 : 308)

³²⁷ Ibid. : 96-97

Through the secular character of religion, the mystical elements have gradually been diminished to the point where city-religion conforms to the rules of the intellect. As Simmel and Bergson have shown, the mystical, irrational, ascetic and reverent feelings that used to accompany religious life have now been replaced by dogma, ecclesiastical vocation and administration. Church and religion in the city do not exist as such ; they are either taken or left - as any other form - and the underlying role which they have played in previous centuries has now been taken over by technology. The end of Western religion is signified by the fact that Christian religion is susceptible to both money and advertising. It resorts to the Faustian technics in order to compete successfully with more novel cultural forms. By commodifying its own belief, Western Christianity negates its own transcendental and metaphysical character and the most "holy" icon can be placed beside the most blasphemous item, both displayed with equal chances as consumer goods. For Spengler as well, these are outcomes of the misunderstanding of the character of religion ; for him, as for most vitalists, religion is "*lived and experienced* metaphysic", and has nothing to do with moralizing which is pure "philistinism".³²⁸ The emphasis on the individualist side of Christian religion relates clearly to the uniqueness of religious experience itself and it erects itself as a barrier to mass religion. This why Simmel and Bergson for example, stressed the mystical encounter between man and the supernatural where dogmatic rules seem to be subordinate to life. Spengler adheres to the same mood and he identifies the counter-feelings that have emerged as a reaction to the loss of religion as an autonomous form. For him, atheism is the characteristic of the megalopolis and the "educated man" who has replaced world-feelings by mechanical and causal relations. At least though, atheism is a positive form of belief ; it affirms the non-existence of God and it replaces Him by a materialist world-view that emphasizes causality and by a non-materialist view that stresses contingency and possibly Fate. It is agnosticism, which has escaped Spengler's vision, that is the feature of high modernity. Agnosticism, not in its philosophical form, but in its escapist bourgeois form, is cowardice personified : it is covert atheism and covert theism at the same time. It is atheism in disguise because the individual cannot "see" and "experience" metaphysics in a locale of material stimuli where everything obeys materialist laws and treats the question of God as antiquated. By contrast, it is veiled theism since the agnostic element includes the possibility of the existence of a supernatural being but this belief since it cannot be derived from the immediate reality *per se* , it is only a residue, a loose but unbroken bond with the old religious form that has outlived its utility. It is in this sense that agnosticism is an evasive world-view where its exponents are torn between two antithetical realms. It is similar to

³²⁸ *ibid.*: 217

the superficial mysticism that flourishes in a parasitical form in the megalopolis. We have seen Simmel's reserved attitude towards occultism and his reduction of the phenomenon to the capitulation of the soul to religious feeling that is superficial and reactionary. Spengler unmasks with much insight the pretentious character of such counter-movements which abound in modern and highly materialist societies :

Materialism would not be complete without the need of now and again easing the intellectual tension, by giving way to moods of myth, by performing rites of some sort, or by enjoying with an inward light-heartedness the charms of the irrational, the unnatural, the repulsive, and even, if need be, the merely silly. (Spengler 1928: 310)

The rationalized soul of the city-dweller aims vainly at a romantic rediscovering of its proto-consciousness and it promotes the self-delusion of the rediscovery of this mythical state of being. He is blinded by his cold rationality to the fact that oriental, magical and mythical forms cannot claim autonomy outside the locale that gave birth to them. They appear in the West as commodified products, are always money-driven and exist for purely escapist reasons as Spengler suggests. The contemporary charlatanism that surrounds the city-dweller manifests itself in various forms that have reached such diversity as to be able to satisfy the whole gamut of half-educated strata. American Christian evangelism, Buddhism, Taoist cults, Neo-Orthodoxy, Neo-Christianity, Satanism, Ecological movements of animal rights and even jugglery among others³²⁹, enhance the pseudo-relativism of the city-dweller who feels an artificial reverence and awe for those exotic world-views, but is too coward to abandon his life-style and locale and acquaint them in their pure form. In this sense, Spengler is thoroughly correct when he proclaims "materialism" as "shallow and honest", but "mock-religion" as "shallow and dishonest".³³⁰ Religion in the city is a lost case and the same applies for its substitutes. In this sense only, atheism is more honest in its materialist side and is undoubtedly connected with the replacement of God by Money as Simmel and Spengler have concluded.

The new type of megalopolitan man that emerges in the urban locale operates only according to concepts of mass, and as Simmel would add, of objects as well. In operating

³²⁹ The same insecurity and false-consciousness justifies the bourgeois soul's preoccupation with trite issues that involve the welfare of the body such as "alcohol questions and Vegetarianism" (Spengler, 1926 : 361). His contempt for those trends is based on the rationale that petty problems have now become central issues of modern life. In the city a spurious and pseudo-ascetic - in terms of nutrition and hygiene - ecological spirit seeks to substitute the materialist ethic of the glutton. Obviously, the question of vegetarianism would be unheard of in the countryside.

³³⁰ Spengler (1928 : 310)

with vitalistic dualisms, Spengler warns against the confusion of the Faustian will-to-power with the expansion and spreading of Western quantitative materialism. With it, the creative fire of the Faustian will-to-power has been extinguished and the lack of depth in every modern conduct testifies to this fact. This modern spirit that appeals to the mass and is interested in filling the "halls and the market-places of the megalopolis", Spengler defines as "*intellectual male-prostitution*".³³¹ The negative portrayal of the preponderance of the male spirit is turned again to fit Spengler's theory. Faithful to the vitalist tradition he separates the spheres of culture according to gender prototypes. Thus, the feminine is "cosmic", "cyclic", earth-bound and it is Time, Destiny and History.³³² By contrast, the masculine displays freedom, animality, mobility and waking-consciousness and it is the one that "experiences Destiny" and "comprehends Causality" which is alien to the Female.³³³ The latter embodies the characteristics of Life as being "maternal" and "plantlike".³³⁴ Spengler perpetuates the dualistic world-view that sees Woman as superior to Man and finds its most sophisticated expression in Simmel's writings on female culture and the relationship between the sexes. The "intuition-intelligence" opposition and the (negative) preponderance of the latter is only a symptom of a more general epistemological fact. Simmel who was acutely aware of the problem locates it within a relativistic framework :

The fundamental relativity in the life of our species lies in the relationship between masculinity and femininity ; this relationship also exhibits the typical process whereby one of a pair of relative elements becomes absolute. We assess the achievements and commitments, the intensity and structural forms of the male and female nature by reference to certain norms. But these norms are not neutral and detached from the opposition between the sexes. On the contrary, they themselves are of a male nature. (Simmel 1984: 102)

Here, Simmel encapsulates the gender problem of modern Civilization and in a sense reaches Spenglerian conclusions. For what does the physiological and psychological independence of the two sexes signifies other than the relativity of their existence and the differentiating nature of their psyche? But almost since the genesis of the social cosmos, one of the two pairs dominates the objective paradigm that is used as a reference point for the evaluation of action that emanates from both sides. The exclusively male criteria accumulate to such an extent that they are taken to be objective in expressing the nature of

³³¹ Spengler (1926 : 360)

³³² Spengler (1928 : 327)

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Ibid.: 328

both sexes. In reality, though, they are products of the male spirit - the spirit of domination - and the female is drawn within this cultural sphere of male constructs without noticing that the tools, and mentality she uses for her own purposes are given to her by the male. The male spirit represents rationality and intellectuality. Its reified existence represents nothing other than the course and structure of the general culture as it has been contemplated by Spengler. It's male rationality finds its apogee in the city.

Spengler placed even the most creative of man's cultural spheres, art, within the general stream of materialization, objectification and consumerism. With the megalopolis the end of "form-development"³³⁵ -the analogy with postmodernity is here indisputable- is perhaps most palpable in the artistic culture. Creative art disappears with the dawn of Civilization :

The transition consists - in every Culture - in Classicism and Romanticism of one sort or another, the former being a sentimental regard for an Ornamentation (rules, laws, types) that has long been archaic and soulless, and the latter a sentimental Imitation, not of life, but of an older Imitation [...] Methods of painting and mannerisms of writing, old forms and new, home and foreign, come and go with the fashion.³³⁶ The inward necessity is no longer there, there are no longer "schools", for everyone selects what and where it pleases him to select. *Art becomes craft-art (Kunstgewerbe)* in all its branches - architecture and music, poetry and drama - and in the end we have a pictorial and literary stock-in-trade which is destitute of any deeper significance and is employed according to taste. This [is the] final or industrial form of Ornament - no longer historical, no longer in the condition of "becoming"- (*italics in the original*) Spengler 1926: 197)

Modern city-art recycles old, archaic and antiquated forms and implants them with the spirit of the metropolis. It is a double-layer of alienation of form and content, the first level regarding reinterpretation, and the second the placement of art creations within the nomological process of consumer products. Regarding the first, Spengler reaches Simmelian conclusions³³⁷ when he laments the lack of style in the city. The other

³³⁵ Spengler (1926 : Table II)

³³⁶ In a similar vein, Simmel locates the spirit of the times in fashion's overcoming of its own boundaries. What constituted an trend of "personal externals" has now permeated even the more rigid and deeply-rooted institutions of society with result that fashion "has acquired an increasing influence over . . . theoretical convictions, and even the moral foundations of life" (Simmel 1971 : 303-304) In this sense, fashion and the metropolitan way of life are indispensable since the former is the mechanism for the viability and sustenance of the latter's extension outside itself.

³³⁷ For Spengler, arbitrariness in expression reflects man's late tendency to break-away with form. Modern era lacks a definite style precisely because it sticks to an individualist version of style (Simmel,1991 [1908] : 68). The culture as a whole is only a collection "and endless repetition of a stock of fixed forms" (Spengler, 1926 : 295). Looking at music for example, Spengler centralizes the growing role of artificiality (*ibid.*: 294) in relation to a decreasing authenticity. For example, contemporary

parameter of the critique is based on the network of art-trade and mass-art, the locales being exhibitions, theatres, concert-halls, cinemas etc. The unquestionable sign of the decline of Western art, for Spengler, was the "farce of Expressionism" where form-creating became organized on the norm of "industrial art".³³⁸ The movement of Expressionism, particularly in the visual arts, can be used as the cultural framework *per se* for the transition into high modernity and the alternatives that reinforced the tension between the organic wholism of community and the mechanical subjectivity of the metropolis. Expressionism is inextricably linked with an enhancement of the Ego and its perception of social reality. This occurs through a reaction of man against the calculable, symmetrical and rational spirit of modern life. It is a return to the instinctual realms of the human psyche which are governed by irrationality and fear. Both these elements play a crucial role in Expressionism. The manifestation of the "psychological content enlarged by imagination"³³⁹ occurs in a disfigured and asymmetrical way. It finds its most complete expression in the aesthetic and sociological significance of the face which mirrors the turmoil of the psyche and its distorted perception of life.

There are further implications of this assertion that are relevant to the relationship between the metropolis, the search for stimuli and the reinterpretation of old or primitive forms. For example, as Simmel argues, "the tremendous attraction that artistic styles far removed both in time and space have for the artistic sense"³⁴⁰ of modern times is related to the search for stimuli. The link between Expressionism and Primitivism which flourished at that time in Germany, points to this fact. The search for the primitive can be

popular music displays precisely this fact : it reinterprets old or alien musical forms and styles - classical, traditional, oriental - in its attempt to imitate the sound-form of the city (organized noise). Faithful to the spirit of megalopolis, it transcends its physical boundaries and is able to assimilate every and any sound as a functional part in a new heterogeneous whole. Hence the cultural imperialism of Western popular music. On the other hand, traditional folk music attempts to imitate the sound of its immediate physical landscape. In this sense its destiny is to remain earth-bound, its melody being *lived* from generation to generation. Spengler's thoughts are in a sense anticipated by the Futurists' writings on art in general. But here, as is the case often with Spengler, lamentation is turned into glorification. Technics thus achieve a quasi-mystical and even positive character. For example, the notion of "organized noise" previously mentioned achieves a clear exposition in Luigi Russolo's differentiation between pure sounds and the complex polyphonic sounds inspired by city-life and its industrial, machine-like organization. For Russolo, as for Spengler, the machine has also conquered the countryside but for the former this is an entirely positive fact. Modern - Faustian - man should search for enjoyment in the "combination of the noises of trams, backfiring motors, carriages and bawling crowds..." (Russolo : 1913 in Apollonio 1973: 76). Here, the Futurists are closer to Spengler than commonly thought where the latter instead of a conservative appears as reactionary modernist (see Herf 1984 : 49-69).

³³⁸ Spengler (1926 : 294). Spengler here deals with painting but one could easily see how he anticipates the form of cinematic art that was shaped around those years. The advent of Expressionism in film, since 1919 verified Spengler's hypotheses, and in 1926 those themes that had preoccupied the vitalists - especially, the preponderance of the mechanical, urban and industrial way of life - were manifested in Fritz Lang's seminal film titled, ironically, "Metropolis".

³³⁹ Spranger (1928 : 147)

³⁴⁰ Simmel (1978 : 474)

interpreted in several ways. Jill Lloyd in an attempt to locate pre-war Expressionist primitivism in relation to the cultural dilemma of the times, points to the influence of Nietzschean vitalism that had underlined most of these attempts to rediscover the intuitive, creative, pure, organic, mythical aspects of man by recourse to archaic and tribal forms of culture and life. This, in essence operated as a bohemian alternative to the conservative *Volk* nostalgia for the *Gemeinschaft*. Her extensive use of Simmel's writings on modernity and art points to the "modernist" character of this movement which aimed at a creative wedlock of primitive techniques with "modernist" mentality in an attempt to point to a new but tribalist spiritualism that would not be cut off from contemporary cultural discourse. In other words, Expressionist primitivism did not aim, in general terms, at an aesthetic - hedonist detachment, but rather at the "authentic contact" between the "expansive freedom" and the "feelings of isolation and estrangement" of the "modern individual".³⁴¹ However, the case with Spengler is different. For Spengler, the interpretive return and utilization to past, archaic, or exotic forms and "motives" characterizes precisely the phase where man has exhausted his creative potential. The decorative craft-art, which plays an important role in Expressionist Primitivism, denotes simply the return - and *finale* - of Faustian man to tribal forms of spiritual expression and cultural ceremony.

Thus the fall of Western Civilization is realized in all parts of life, according to Spengler who simply carried previous vitalistic theories to their logical outcome. Again, the crux of Spengler's argument lies in the immense power of the city. Anticipating modern arguments about "core" and "peripheral" economies, Spengler reduces the cultural problem we discussed so far to the monetary robustness of city-economies :

World-economy itself, the characteristic economy of all Civilizations ought properly to be called world-city-economy. The destinies even of this world-economy are now decided in a few places, the "money-markets of the world" - in Babylon, Thebes, and Rome, in Byzantium and Baghdad, in London, New York, Berlin and Paris. (Spengler 1928: 485)

The centralization of economy - in the form of Stock-Markets - denotes a globalization as oligarchy where the economically strong decide the fate of the peripherally weak. The implications and the political future that awaits this centralization of money-capital shall be looked at as pure manifestations of pessimistic vitalism, in the following and concluding section. There, the unity of Simmel's and Spengler's key concepts, "tragedy" and "destiny" will bring the discussion to a close in my attempt to mark the theoretical

³⁴¹ Lloyd (1991 : 81)

affinities between the two critics of modernity.

d) The Residues of Vitalism for our Culture - Concluding Remarks :

Spengler's departure from Simmel is to be found in the notion of formlessness that was seen as a threat, primarily in individualistic terms. Simmel, at the end of his life, hailed WWI as the end of this crisis and the marking point of the transition from formlessness to form : life has once more, followed its inner logic and rebelled. WWI marked precisely the end-point of the "destiny of a highly developed culture",³⁴² and signaled its rebirth out of the ruins of war. Since I have already elaborated on Simmel's views on the war (Chapter 4), it is perhaps appropriate to examine the vitalistic thread that ties his and Spengler's theories together.

The barbarism of materialism with its persecution of every form and the Civilization's capitulation to formlessness posited a need for a new type of order. The formlessness that according to Simmel ought to have entered a phase of recuperation and gradual orderliness, with Spengler, it seems that it only changes features. The conclusion of the Western drama follows one more act : the "dictatorship of money" is superseded by Caesarism. The return to this old form of monarchic politics is only a natural consequence of the historical process of the West. By Caesarism, Spengler means "a kind of government which, irrespective of any constitutional formulation" it is truly, another return to formlessness. It is the only antidote against money which is bound to collapse as a symbol ; its replacement is the great individual. Employing to the fullest Nietzsche's will-to-power, Spengler reduces every party-formation, political programme, the concepts of "democracy" and "peace", to liberal-bourgeois constructs. War is counterposed as a *fact*. It is bound to happen being generated by life's *becoming*. Spengler neutralizes the concept of war from moral implications by seeing it as a phase in a natural process. The same happened with Simmel but in a less marked manner. Thus, for Spengler,

War is the primary politics of *everything* that lives, and so much so that in the deeps battle and life are one, and being and will-to-battle expire together. (Spengler 1928: 440)

Later, in anti-materialist spirit and in a rejection of Darwin, he adds,

War is the creator, hunger the destroyer, of all great things . In war life is elevated by death, often to that point of irresistible force whose mere existence guarantees victory, but in the economic life hunger awakens the ugly, vulgar, and wholly unmetaphysical sort of fearfulness for one's life under which the higher form-world of a Culture miserably collapses and the naked struggle for existence of the human beasts begins. (Spengler 1928: 471)

³⁴² Simmel (1976 [1917] : 265)

Spengler's whole world-view and theory of modernity is clarified here. The preponderance of the materialistic instincts of man - in the form of city-mass - turns Spengler to the extreme individualism that recognizes in man something more than his bestial features and needs. War was seen by the vitalists as the last attempt of the individual to awake from his material narcosis, imposed by daily urban monotony, Epicurean materialism, intellectual conformity and emotional passivity. Since all these features were predominant in pre-war Germany, the outbreak of the war came about as the verification of the vitalistic theory of change. In my discussion of Bergson's and Simmel's vitalism in the context of war I had referred briefly to Heraclitus. His was the first theory of change and Spengler's ideas on war must have had some foundation on Heraclitus.³⁴³

As I have shown so far, the spirit that permeates Simmel's and Spengler's thought is the same and the method of their inquiry profoundly similar (the analogical - formal sociology of the former, and the physiognomic tact of the latter have much in common). But in order to condense their notions I need to return to the ideas of "tragedy" and "destiny". Simmel's essay *The Ruin* is formulated according to Spenglerian conceptions and it provides a synthesis of their beliefs. This is so both in terms of epistemology as in terms of a theory of culture. Despite displaying a distinct aesthetic approach, where one aims at extracting a cosmic meaning from the detail, Simmel's essay reveals many insights in a masterly way. Simmel in locating the ruin within the "man - nature" dualism traces a process of deterioration of man's thing-created :

[In the ruin] the balance between nature and spirit, which the building manifested, shifts in favor of nature. This shift becomes a cosmic tragedy which, so we feel, makes every ruin an object infused with our nostalgia ; for now the decay appears as nature's revenge for the spirit's having violated it by making a form in its own image. (Simmel 1959: 259)

³⁴³ Spengler had written a dissertation on Heraclitus, and indeed the influence of the Greek philosopher is obvious. Heraclitus united Fate with Justice and this Spengler incorporated in his theory. On war, Heraclitus claims : "War is the father and the king of all things. It proves some to be gods and others to be mere men, turning these into slaves and the former into masters [...] One must know that **war is universal, and that justice is strife, and that all things develop through strife and by necessity**".(Heraclitus in Popper, 1945 vol.I, : 16 [Emphasis added]). The last phrase comprises the skeleton of Spengler's theory of life. The universal character of war and its necessity are simply different terms for Spengler's Destiny-Idea. "Justice" and "Strife" as synonymous terms stand for the Nietzschean and Spenglerian, will-to-power. Elsewhere, Heraclitus elaborates on the destiny of the strongest : "Who falls fighting will be glorified by gods and by men [...] The greater the fall the more glorious the Fate [...] The best seek one thing above all others : eternal fame [...] One man is worth more than ten thousand, if he is Great." (Ibid.:17). The 'leader - led' relationship is held to be the key for political conduct. As we have seen, Spengler holds exactly the same.

The Spenglerian themes are apparent : clearly, the naturalist element ; this, of course, can be traced back to Goethe's view of an anthropomorphic nature, but the way it appears here echoes Spengler's use of it. Again, we perceive the ruin as the testimony of the constant battle between nature and man, and the inner process of decay of the building appears as a fateful consequence of nature's force. Simmel sees this fact as tragic. But tragedy is always fate-laden :

[. . .] the ruin strikes us so often as tragic [. . .] because destruction here is not something senselessly coming from the outside but rather the realization of a tendency inherent in the deepest layer of existence of the destroyed. (Simmel 1959: 263)

This is the reason why Spengler, for example, does not resort to moral judgements as far as his idea of Destiny *as* death or decay is concerned. It is a process within which the ultimate end already exists. As Simmel says, it happens "by virtue of a profound *a priori*".³⁴⁴ The ruin is inextricably linked with time. It is the bridge between the present and the past, not a dead past but a past whose presence is felt in the present. Here, Simmel and Spengler are once more in harmony :

[. . .] the character of the ruin [is] *past* . It is the site of life from which life has departed - but this is nothing merely negative, added to it only by thought [. . .] In the case of the ruin, the fact that life with its wealth and its changes once dwelled here constitutes an immediately perceived presence. The ruin creates the present form of a past life, not according to the contents or remnants of that life, but according to its past as such. (Simmel 1959: 265)

In the ruin it is as if the memories of life have been objectified and make their presence felt; it is one of those irrational and inexplicable feelings that man experiences in sites with a particular historical weight, for example, where the energy of the past seems unable to be released from the confines of the ruin. But, as Simmel says, intelligence enters and organizes this profound life-feeling according to moral imperatives and rationalized feelings ; it taints it with negativity, rather than fulfillment. Spengler was also aware of this particular grandeur that characterizes ruins, as mystical containers of sacred past experience. It is a particular feature of Western action to preserve "the ennoblement of decay"³⁴⁵, "*as ruins*"³⁴⁶ since for the Faustian man, "age [. . .] ennobles all things".³⁴⁷

³⁴⁴ Simmel (1959 : 263)

³⁴⁵ Spengler (1926 : 253)

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*: 254

³⁴⁷ *ibid.*: 255

All these thoughts conform with the vitalistic conception of Time as Life introduced first by Bergson, but they acquire a mystical essence with the Germans, whose romantic heritage has always turned them to the past in a foundationalist sense. The element of contradiction seems to crop up again in Simmel's theory in order to articulate itself either as "tragedy" or "destiny". In a noematically dense excerpt, Simmel concludes the essay and transcends the strict aesthetic interests that have provided a firm basis for some of the most acute observations in modern western thought. It returns to the notion of the Faustian will-to-power that can only be defeated, by forces immanent in itself, and accordingly its presence as ruin, denotes precisely its fatefully tragic and inner defeat :

Perhaps this is the reason for our general fascination with decay and decadence, a fascination which goes beyond what is merely negative and degrading. The rich and many-sided culture, the unlimited *impressionability* , and the understanding open to everything, which are characteristic of decadent epochs, do signify this coming together of all contradictory strivings. An equalizing justice connects the uninhibited unity of all things that grow apart and against one another with the decay of those men and works of men which now can only yield, but can no longer create and maintain their own forms out of their own strength. (Simmel 1959: 266)

The significance of this quotation lies on the delicate meaning of certain phrases since they incorporate the kernel of both thinkers and they display it as a unity of "tragedy" and "destiny". For example, "the unlimited impressionability" and the "understanding open to everything" denote what today one would call, post-modern society. The uncritical response to stimuli signifies precisely the decadent style of this (the postmodern era) that Simmel identifies here. The "equalizing justice" refers to the leveling process that is able, by reducing everything to the lowest common denominator, to unite diversity. The "decay of [...] men and works of men" addresses simply, the Spenglerian notion of destiny that awaits every creator and every thing-created : decay and inner destruction. These men who "can no longer create and maintain their own forms" are those creative few whose subjective energy acquires an objectified form. The result is, as Spengler notes, an age "of transition, of formlessness 'between the ages'" where the confusing anarchy and radical preponderance of play-forms is beginning to give its place to "new tendencies".³⁴⁸ Here the notion of transcendence is hinted by Spengler obviously in a more pessimistic form than Simmel.

In this simple description both thinkers, based on Nietzsche's idea of decadence, provide what is perhaps the most adequately formulated theory of modern Western life. They anticipate most of the issues that occupy modern sociological discourse and the

³⁴⁸ Spengler (1934: 58)

advantage they have over other theorists, is that - especially in the case of Spengler - they managed to incorporate most cultural spheres into their world-view without contradiction. The relationship between Simmel's and Spengler's theories covers more than simply the same vitalistic and anti-scientific spirit of the period. Spengler extended conclusions that were already arrived at by Simmel, but they were only implicit in his thought. The point is that relativism and vitalism are closely tied theories and that both ought to be readdressed for an understanding of modernity. It is not a coincidence that even postmodern themes draw largely on their premises but they abstain from addressing them directly. In fact, *lebensphilosophie* is *the* theory of modernity, and Simmel and Spengler ought to find their proper place in it. Regarding the latter, I ought to agree this time with H.Stuart Hughes³⁴⁹ that his theory is the best account we have at the moment, of the current state of the Western Faustian Civilization.

³⁴⁹ Hughes (1952 : 165)

Chapter 6 : The Relativistic Implications of Modernity

I. Introduction

In my examination of the far-reaching effects of Simmel's epistemology for the understanding of the cultural milieu of modern man's existence, I have proceeded analytically and analogically. The scrutiny of Simmel's relativism, its influence for the articulation of the sociology of forms and the exploration into the most intricate aspects of relativist epistemology provided the strictly analytical part of my argument.

Furthermore, the utilization of relativism in relation to historicism and vitalism was examined comparatively through the contextualization of Simmel's thought in the intellectual climate of the times. This climate seemed to me to be epitomized by the contributions to the history of ideas by Dilthey, Bergson and Spengler. The comparison between these thinkers' programmatic theories and Simmel's more speculative vision yielded interesting and fruitful analogies. These took gradually a more synthetic form in the previous chapter where I attempted to integrate cultural critique within a relativistic and vitalistic framework of explanation.

In this chapter my synthetic approach will take its final form. My procedure here features a chronologically unorthodox twist, namely, a return to Nietzsche. His aphoristic thought lies at the root of any attempt to comprehend modernity along with the structural changes that have occurred since and that have been attributed to a qualitative shift of Western civilization (postmodernity). In short, my argument in the following pages seeks to establish the fact that any notions of modernity or - provisionally - of postmodernity are comprehended only through a reference to Nietzsche, Simmel and Spengler. This is not a reductionistic statement and it does not simplify the complexity of the argument for practical purposes. On the contrary, the anti-modern spirit that pervades the thought of those three thinkers manifests itself in complex and often obscure form. However, as I shall try to argue, there seems to be a crucial development in the way the argument appears through its various representatives. Nietzsche's aphorisms - fierce but never uncritical - acquire a more sceptical and moderate form with Simmel until they are finally incorporated in a programmatic form in the thought of Spengler. What unites these personalities is more the uniformity of the spirit that permeates their approaches rather than the uniformity of their conclusions. Their orientation is based on bridging the gap between epistemology and cultural critique in such a way that all social and psychological

phenomena appear as parts or consequences of a cosmology. Nietzsche for example, subverts the very notion of epistemology by recourse to a psychological/biological formulation of a cosmic nihilism. Simmel on the other hand, removes the vitriolic character of Nietzsche's attack on modernity and attempts to provide a relativistic, but useful, epistemology that works as an explanatory and covertly progressive framework for a sociological understanding of modern culture. The culmination of this critique of modernity acquires with Spengler the character of a *weltanschauung* which is, as I have already argued, rooted in Nietzsche's concepts of the "will-to-power" and the "eternal recurrence" and in Simmel's description of a highly commodified urban culture.

In order to address the implications of these theories and to place Simmel's thought within the context of contemporary life, it seems that some reference to the Nietzschean critique is required. This will enable me to explain further features of Simmel's idea of modernity from a firmer basis. It will also provide the opportunity to discuss Simmel's own appraisal, convergence and departure from Nietzsche's ideas that I am using here.

II. Nietzsche, Nihilism and Modern Life.

Even the ideals of science can be deeply, yet completely unconsciously influenced by decadence : our entire sociology is proof of that. The objection to it is that from experience it knows only the form of the decay of society, and inevitably it takes its own instincts of decay for the norms of sociological judgement [...]

[...] Our entire sociology simply does not know any other instinct than that of the herd, i.e., that of the *sum of zeroes* - where every zero has "equal rights", where it is virtuous to be zero. - (Nietzsche 1968: 33)

Since modernity became a central feature of social science, art and philosophy, a particular thinker has been consistently regarded as the chief diagnostician of the cultural crisis that has shaped every aspect of man's existence. Friedrich Nietzsche is the instigator of a penetrating, far-reaching and often fierce debate about the current stage of modern civilization, its potential course, and about the accuracy of his claim that nihilism has been central to modernity.

Here I am going to address only a handful of issues in Nietzsche's thought that are pertinent to my argument. My approach to his thought despite being eclectic will try to maintain the kernel of the argument so that misinterpretation is avoided. The way of coming to terms with Nietzsche's critique of modernity is by reference to his posthumous work *The Will to Power* and also to one of the foremost Nietzscheans, Hans Vaihinger. His *The Philosophy of As-If* , provides a further exposition of the relationship between the will-to-power, fictions and pessimism (the latter seen as symptomatic of contradiction

in explanation or better of the false belief in the absolute validity of values or methodological categories).

For Nietzsche, the preservation of the species is safeguarded through the appropriation of exoteric factors by the *inner* "form-creating" force and needs of the species.³⁵⁰ The utility of preservation which is based on self-expansion is achieved through the force of the species' will. This will aims at overcoming and dominating whatever resists its expansion. It is directed towards power, which in turn is the guiding principle of all life. Nietzsche does not hold though that utility is the criterion for truth. He rather points to the fact that utility lies behind those conceptions that we hold to be true. This rationale has influenced Spengler on the notions of mathematics, causality and science and it corresponds essentially to the German pragmatism articulated in detail by Vaihinger. Pragmatism or Nietzschean perspectivism are crucial elements in epistemology and the critique of civilization. In fact, pragmatism stems out of epistemological presuppositions wrought in Nietzsche's European nihilism. His type of perspectivism lies on the notion of abstraction from reality according to a partial perspective which takes the "*construction* of identical cases, of the appearance of sameness"³⁵¹ as the precondition of all knowledge and life. This precondition is instinctual and primitive and it operates according to the will-to-power. With Nietzsche, we are confronted with the first systematic subversion of the social character of epistemology on the basis of organic, biologicistic and primarily psychological processes. For Vaihinger who constructs his theory of fictions on Nietzschean premises,

Ideas, judgements and conclusions, that is to say thought, act as a means in the service of the Will to Live and dominate. Thought is originally only a means in the struggle for existence and to this extent only a biological function. (Vaihinger 1924: xlvi)

I have already exposed the character of fictions as tools which are abstractions from reality - according to a limited perspective - and which entail practical significance. Their theoretical (and consequently, practical) validity is only negated when these categories become rigidified, when they are transformed into hypotheses (with a view to verification) and then turned into dogma (fiction mistaken for reality). However, according to both Nietzsche and Vaihinger, the very function of fictions presupposes an element of illusion, as long as they satisfy practical needs and as long as they allow development of further fictions they are legitimate and useful means for human conduct. Explanatory failure and contradiction arise only when the inner utility of fictions has been exhausted, their

³⁵⁰ Nietzsche (1968 : 344)

³⁵¹ Ibid. : 293

function has come to a halt, namely when the human agent has "falsely *projected*" them "into the essence of things".³⁵² The illusory character of these categories stems from the fact that they remain (psychological) categories even when their function has been fulfilled and "their purpose achieved".³⁵³ The contradictory nature of these "psychic constructs" cautions against their identification with objectivity or reality. These contradictions have arisen only because fictions ("conceptual and ideational aids") were seen as corresponding with reality, something which is inconsistent with the nature of fictive construction (partial abstraction according to a limited perspective). My earlier discussion (chapter 5) of religion as a cultural form and the psychological symptoms it gives rise to for modern man, is endemic to these assumptions. Agnosticism, for example, corresponds to the psychic residue of the fiction of religion. Despite the fact that its purpose has been accomplished, it is still present as a psychological category. It receives spurious manifestation only when its very existence, as I have demonstrated, is contradictory. Here the discussion reaches the point where the theory of knowledge and the theory of culture converge. The transition from the breakdown of fictions-being-turned-dogmata is insightfully captured by Vaihinger and Nietzsche. The transition from hypothesis to dogma (failure of explanation) is closely tied to the transition from pessimism to nihilism (failure of existence). For example, Vaihinger writes:

Mankind is beginning to realize to an increasing extent that "understanding" is only an illusion, that life and action are based upon illusions and lead to illusions. We feel we have been duped and are annoyed. It is to this that pessimism is due. The psyche is in every way dissatisfied to-day with what has been accomplished, for neither the purposes of action nor those of thought seem to have been attained. Yet in reality they have been attained, that is, in so far as they have been justified at all. Pessimism arises out of exaggerated idealistic pretensions. (Vaihinger 1924: 175)

The feeling of inadequacy stems from the fact that unattainability of truth has demonstrated the futility of hypotheses. For if hypotheses are held to be closer approximations to truth why is it that truth never seems closer (at least psychologically)? Why is the agonizing subject governed first by scepticism as to the existence of hypotheses, and then by despair as to the collapse of the world (its world) made possible first by hypotheses and then confirmed through its being hypostasized by dogma? For Vaihinger, as I presume would be the case for American pragmatists as well, believing something to be true has been gradually substituted by the identification of this belief with truth! In other words, and

³⁵² *ibid.* : 14

³⁵³ Vaihinger (1924 : 177)

here I enter a more contemporary domain, failure of particular explanatory attempts have been equated for the failure and dissolution of all explanation. As Vaihinger says, this view overlooks the fact all explanation aims at practical problem-solving which also generates the conditions for form-creating. It gives rise to a form of vulgar idealism and today it is epitomized by postmodernism which also utilizes the most simplistic form of relativism (difference, incommensurability) in order to sustain the disbelief in explanation and in our case, the disbelief in fictions as heuristic concepts regarding explanation. Vaihinger brilliantly penetrates at the heart of the postmodern condition. "Scepticism" he says, disseminates uncertainty and doubt thus becomes contradictory when it "extends" its rationale "to the practical purposes of life and quite arbitrarily assumes that these are not attained".³⁵⁴ Vaihinger warns against questioning "the purpose fulfilled by the general application" of a fiction, "namely the introduction of order"! The need to construct solutions to problems according to some basic criteria of regularity or "sameness" is the most primitive fact of life and as Nietzsche points out it precedes thought itself. Herein lies the essence of the critique of civilization epistemologically. Nietzsche summarizes eloquently the marriage between epistemology and cultural critique as follows :

This same species of man, grown one stage poorer, no longer possessing the strength to interpret, to create fictions, produces *nihilists*. A nihilist is a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought *not* to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist. According to this view, our existence (action, suffering, willing, feeling) has no meaning : the pathos of "in vain" is the nihilists' pathos - at the same time, **as pathos, an inconsistency on the part of the nihilists.** ([italics in the original ; emphasis added] Nietzsche 1968: 317-318)

Nietzsche's affirmation and denial of nihilism stems from the contradictory character of the enthusiastic expositions of nihilism which call modern man to embrace meaninglessness. The absurdity of this scheme, that Nietzsche is aware of, is corroborated by the postmodern twist towards nihilism as a positive value. This is obviously a notion that is articulated in more detail and in a more sophisticated form by Heidegger, but with postmodern thought it is expressed in a similar way. A nihilism that aims at the creation of a new order is a paradoxical idea. Nihilism clothed by a goal, even a negative one, is no longer nihilism. A society of accomplished nihilists is no longer a nihilistic society ; but even if this is what postmodern writers aim at, nihilism as a means is contradictory ; the call to a fully conscious "fictionalized experience of reality" undermines the very notion of fiction since it is always guided as a reaction of the

³⁵⁴ Ibid. : 173

"dissatisfied idealist" against the non-realization of his ideal. What Vaihinger actually says in this respect is thoroughly correct :

The imaginary (the absolute, ideal) is therefore justifiable in spite of its unreality. Without the imaginary factor neither science nor life in their highest form are possible. The real tragedy of life is that the most valuable ideas are, from the point of view of reality, worthless. (Vaihinger 1924: 44)

Since fiction is an integral fact of life in its function of creating useful, practical and expedient illusions, how can its own purpose remain unaffected if we elevate fiction onto a dogma as postmodern writers seem to imply ? Fiction as fiction is valuable only as a means of guiding action, the theoretically fictional character of which is always hidden and psychologically unconscious. Any attempt to the contrary makes a fiction a master-name, which postmodern writers consistently negate, and strips from it its utility. Fictions which do not cultivate (albeit up to a point) the belief to firm, idealistic or even transcendental values are no longer fictions ; they become in their own way, useless fictions. The imaginary cannot lie on the fiction-creating process that Nietzsche has identified as being absent from modernity, because it really negates this very process ; but the very effort to elevate the imaginary as an absolute value is a contradiction on the part of those who maintain the valuelessness of life. The proposition "everything is fictional and imaginary" is contradictory in the same manner as its opposite which adheres to omnipresent realism. Similarly, the nihilist negation of teleology (with its concomitant notion of progress), of Being and of truth, does not bring about a complete dissolution of constancy but only a loosening of it (Simmel).

Regarding the implications of the epistemological foundation of modernity (i.e. destruction of metaphysics, formlessness, secularization, nihilism etc.) we can benefit further from Nietzsche. The relativistic consequences of modernity are located in the debasement of rigorous theories of knowledge, such as perspectivism, pragmatism, relationism and vitalism. The relative validity of perspectives has been translated by contemporary social science and practice as the equal validity of perspectives. To this aberration one must admit that Nietzsche's own ambiguity has contributed as well. However, as I shall emphasize later through Simmel's interpretation of his thought, Nietzsche attacked both the symptoms of nihilism and the belief in the permanence of nihilism as such. In despising the "herd", the positivist interpretation of sociology along with its egalitarian orientation, reason, causality, Christianity, civilization, vulgar relativism, mathematics, Nietzsche is the first philosopher who requests the creation of a new order of things other than what most representatives of the *Kulturkritik* envisaged, namely a return to Community. Perhaps the impossibility of such a return to previous

types of social organization, contributed to the ostensibly desperate critique of modernity. However, it is evident that the impetus behind Nietzsche's forceful account of life, was a moral one. The vulgar relativism, which is celebrated by postmodern writers under the banner of nihilism or difference and which Nietzsche abhorred is described as follows :

The modern spirit's lack of discipline, dressed up in all sorts of moral fashions. - The showy words are : tolerance (for "the incapacity for Yes and No") ; *la largeur de sympathie* (= one-third indifference, one-third curiosity, one-third pathological irritability); "objectivity" (lack of personality, lack of will, incapacity for "love") ; "freedom" versus rules (romanticism) ; "truth" versus forgery and lies (naturalism) ; being "scientific" (the "*document humain*" : in other words, the novel of colportage and addition in place of composition) ; "passion" meaning disorder and immoderation ; "depth" meaning confusion, the profuse chaos of symbols. ([italics in the original] Nietzsche 1968: 50)

This psychological unveiling of postmodernity has also been sociologically examined by Simmel who identifies the microsociological manifestation of such symptoms. In my discussion of modern (and debased) forms of scepticism, agnosticism and solipsism in the earlier chapter on Spengler, I aimed at the same thing : to point to the existential dislocation of modern man from foundational thought and life with a view to overcoming this nihilistic and subjectivistic condition. The idea of transcendence is never clearly set out by Nietzsche. His concept of the Overman³⁵⁵ comes closer to what one may read as a wish to surpass the nihilistic age. The immanence of transcendence in Nietzsche is hinted by the transitory character of nihilism as a cultural predisposition peculiar only to a particular epoch. If in our age, the crisis that has resulted from the point of convergence of the scientific, religious or moral world-view³⁵⁶ has facilitated nihilism then it corresponds only to the "modern world" rather than "the world of existence".³⁵⁷ Nietzsche ascribes the widespread feeling of crisis to the failure of previous values but not to the failure and inadequacy of values in general. The failure of Christianity as a cultural form, the exhaustion of its utility, does not make values or types of morality and order useless ; on the contrary, Christianity's decline demands the creation of such moral order. The "new values" that Nietzsche longs for³⁵⁸ are to emerge through creative will-to-power. The

³⁵⁵ Apart from Nietzsche's own ideas, the utilization of the Overman-idea by other thinkers points to the direction of transcendence. The National Socialists interpreted it biologically and racially, Jünger technologically for the creation of the elitist "worker-soldier *typus* ", and Heidegger aesthetically towards the rediscovery of authentic experience.

³⁵⁶ Nietzsche (1968 : 359)

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*: 23

³⁵⁸ *ibid.*: 4

affirmation of values is corroborated by the illusion of perpetual formlessness and meaninglessness that the universe has acquired after the decline of the old order ; this "is only a *transitional* stage".³⁵⁹ The death of God and the death of metaphysics acquire thus a new meaning. For Nietzsche,

One interpretation has collapsed ; but because it was considered *the* interpretation it now seems as if there were no meaning at all in existence, as if everything were in vain. ([italics in the original] Nietzsche 1968: 35)

In a sense nihilism is based on a fiction : the fiction or illusion of the collapse of all order, of all criteria for progress of all success or creative action. In fact, internal failure in the previous dominant form or paradigm (albeit Nietzsche implicitly points to the illusory character of the dominance of one form or interpretation) is what has brought about the illusion of nothingness. Similarly, Simmel identifies the fact that "the destruction of one social order in favour of another gives the impression that all order and regularity is being abandoned...".³⁶⁰ The belief in the usefulness and inseparable function of the categories of order and constancy for human action, is given a new dimension by Simmel. His appropriation of Nietzsche's thought is based on moderating the nihilistic assumptions about culture. Simmel, both on the level of epistemology and critique of culture, reinvents the notion of post-nihilist order - despite his late pessimism - by extending Nietzsche's longing for such order, through a vitalistic metaphysics.

III. Simmel and Modernity / Epilogue

Most of the themes that are addressed in Nietzsche's *The Will to Power* are analyzed philosophically by Simmel within the context of the former's thought. Simmel's essays on Nietzsche aim at debunking the myth of Nietzsche as an a-moral pessimist or nihilist. Aside of their metaphysical significance Simmel's meditations contain a profound social character. Simmel stresses the following elements in Nietzsche which are crucial for an epistemologically centred discussion of culture : the question of individualism, the need

³⁵⁹ *ibid.*: 10-11

³⁶⁰ Simmel (1978 : 170)

for master-names (fictions), the grounding of the life-principle for social conduct, the quest for order vis-a-vis hedonistic anarchism, the need for transcendence, and the metaphysical, subjective and intuitive resolution of life's contradiction.

Every society in any epoch has been characterized by the need towards uniformity, the need towards the incorporation of the scattered elements of reality into an orderly framework of existence. The question of permanence or destruction of such a framework (usually metaphysical) has been at the core of modern social science and philosophy. By recourse though to pragmatism and to Vaihinger's "law of ideational shifts" (i.e. the transition from fiction to hypothesis to dogma) one can appreciate better Nietzsche's and Simmel's attempts to illuminate the illusory character of modern life. This gradual transition to dogmatism and obviously the need to undermine it, is observed by Simmel on the concept of society. The reification of the concept of "society" that took place during the late nineteenth century has led to the problematic (and obviously dogmatic) identification of "social existence with the fact of humanity".³⁶¹ The fiction of the concept of society which had incorporated a certain element of laxity and elasticity so that it can reconcile or even unite diverse explanations has been fused with dogma. The importance of Nietzsche's thought lies on the fact that he attempted to release human existence from its bondage with a mechanical, solid and functional social whole. By emphasizing the creative, often biological and organic traits of humans and by extending them from their purely physiological strictures through the concept of will, Nietzsche aligned himself with individualism. This kind of individualism was of an exceptional character since it was never meant to be interpreted as a relapse to solipsism. Nietzsche's individualism aimed at bringing to the surface the human subject's own creative powers, which had been suppressed by a dogmatic society and not society as such. Similarly, according to Simmel, Nietzsche never conceives the individual as the antithesis of society or as a self-enclosed hermit. For both thinkers,

The only definitive realities in humanity are individuals, yet societies are so self-sufficient that from a socio-ethico viewpoint one could claim that the individual, like the atom, is but a fiction. (Simmel 1986: 145)

It is because the fictions of "society" and "individual" acquired a rigid status throughout the period of early social science, that eventually extreme and eccentric positions flourished on both edges of the dualism. Nietzsche's philosophy verges on the individualistic side of the dualism but never fully embraces it. It is the temperament of Nietzsche rather than the content of his philosophy that has gained him the narrow label of

³⁶¹ Simmel (1986 : 144)

the "immoralist". This has caused, as Simmel aptly observes,

[...] the horde of his followers [to] find in the liberation from traditional moralities an excuse for being libertines, and not a challenge to create a new law. For Nietzsche, however, [...] the need for a new, positive, and relentlessly demanding "ought" was self-evident. For him, the interpretations of his followers would have been as decadent as democratic thought was, or as would be any decline of the will into weakness. The instinct to pursue the great goals of humanity is violated as much by no laws at all, as by perverted and life-denying laws that sap the strong. (Simmel 1986: 160)

The equation of mediocrity with lawlessness serves as an accurate description of the cultural "ought" proposed by postmodern thinkers. Turning aside the creative elements of humankind, they advocate the construction of criteria of social conduct according to the principles of the commonplaceness, mediocrity and average type, in other words, all those characteristics of human culture that have impeded it from advancement, progress and creation of higher ideals or morality. Nietzsche is in essence the critic not of modernity but of postmodernity. Nietzsche does not deny individualistic difference ; however he does not subject humanity to the mediocre manifestation of this difference. He, on the contrary, reinforces the notion of difference not as an elaborate system of equal monads, but as a willful (action-creating, form-creating) principle which emanates from those agents who are strong enough to resist the downward levelling process that nullifies human creativity by rendering it to monotonous apathy. The contribution of the democratic and socialistic ethic of equality to the populist understanding of this equality, has caused Nietzsche to defend differentiation by clothing it with a biologicistic fabric. What Nietzsche attacks and what has been consequently utilized by postmodern writers is, as Simmel notes, Stirner's negation of "objective standards"³⁶² extrinsic to the ego. The subsequent anarchy of this kind of solipsism (which is based on the reification of the notion of difference) corresponds to what Nietzsche had identified as the cause of nihilism, namely the projection of the herd's needs and self-image onto cosmic values. Simmel on the notion of individuality makes a very insightful distinction : he terms Nietzsche's ideal as "personalism" vis-a-vis Stirner's "egoism". The former's "personalism aspires to be something" while the latter's "egoism aspires to have something".³⁶³ In this light and in the context of a creative will-to-power that aims "to move onward to an objectively higher level of humanity"³⁶⁴, Nietzsche's vitalism contains the element of transcendence in both

³⁶² Ibid. : 162

³⁶³ ibid. : 169

³⁶⁴ ibid.

a metaphysical but also sociologically meaningful sense. It is not surprising that along with the most creative elements of vitalism that have been thrown into oblivion, Nietzsche's concept of the Overman and will-to-power have survived in adulterated form. In fact, according to Simmel,

From the standpoint of Nietzschean duty, the poorly masked and subjectivistic hedonism of the so-called Nietzscheans is only a reversion to a lower level, to the laxity of pessimism, and to the barren use of power, inasmuch as a life that follows the subjective conditions of pleasure and pain must run into a dead end. Thus, the hedonism of Nietzscheans is decadence and declining life, which transfers its objects from the lower elements of society to the baser elements of the subject. (Simmel 1986: 169)

It must be by now clear that those interpretations (such as the hedonist one or the one provided by the Nazis and Jünger's dark version of the Overman) have little authenticity if seen as Nietzschean positions ; they might have been inspired by his regulative ideas but it is rather implausible that they have acquired since a more concrete or real form.

The Nietzschean notion of transcendence is clothed, as I have stressed earlier, in the metaphorical concept of the Overman. It posits the need and the moral imperative for transcendence of man's current state - biologically, ethically and metaphysically. Simmel interprets the Overman

[...] as a task that grows with the progress of humanity : once the task posed by a particular present is fulfilled, a new one posed by the ideals of this present arises immediately. (Simmel 1986: 174)

Simmel's *Lebensphilosophie* with its relativist corollary opens up the way for the "beyond" both in terms of epistemological categories but also in terms of the existential state of man. The vitalist notion of the double-boundary (more-life, more-than-life) which emphasizes creation and the overcoming of the thing-created serves precisely the purpose of rendering creativity the *a priori* of human activity. By doing so, Simmel absolutizes life as such and consequently human action. The transcendent character of life aims at absolutizing the dynamism (temporality) of every life-process ; additionally, life evolves only by means of the creativity of its agents. The significant aspect for Simmel is that the "no longer vital" element of life - the objective manifestation of its contents - is just as essential as its opposite. He stresses that "imagination produces content" of "logical coherency" and "certain validity" which is "independent" of the conditions of its creation.³⁶⁵ So whereas other thinkers would be sceptical as to the metaphysical validity

³⁶⁵ Simmel (1971 : 371)

of life's partial objectification of its energy, Simmel renders the objectifying process functional for the purpose of life : its own self-expansion by means of transcendence. Accordingly, "transcendence is immanent in life".³⁶⁶

Vitalism acquires here further methodological significance. As I have shown, Simmel's thought, as is the case with all vitalists, operates with dualistic schemes. These frameworks often generate problems in the form of reductionistic statements or contradictions. Within the context of the *Gemeinschaft - Gesellschaft* debate I have already indicated problems which arise from the hypostasization of the dualism. Simmel seems to be aware of such methodological questions hence his quest for a resolution of what he saw as pairs of opposites. Despite the fact that this resolution lies on the purely intuitive and experiential aspect of human existence, it is worth looking briefly at his reflections on that matter.

It must be clear by now that Simmel was opposed to dogmatism and absolutism as theories of knowledge. To this end he resorted to the utility of partial explanations and fictions. When referring to the one-sidedness of all philosophical systems, Simmel acknowledges the necessity of one-sidedness for life. However, he also points to the overcoming of this one-sidedness through our knowledge of it as such and of its limits. Yet we are always enclosed in such one-sidedness. The same rationale holds for cultural forms ; our knowledge of their partial character does not eliminate their utility. Their utility is exhausted only when they acquire a rigid and absolute status. The fact that we know that we don't know corresponds to this rationale. Contradiction has here only a phenomenal character. Our knowledge is always complemented by our ignorance or inability to know everything. The case is similar with vitalism : in life's overcoming of itself (through more-life and more-than-life), "contradiction only arises when one hardens the two aspects of this unity into opposed, mutually exclusive conceptions".³⁶⁷ Only "if hardened and logically independent" these complementary ideas "show discrepancies among themselves".³⁶⁸ Simmel's resolution of this ostensible contradiction does not lie among the potential and function of the intellect ; it is intuitive. To read this as an evasion of methodological problems is clearly a misinterpretation. Simmel's reference to intuition corresponds to the useful function of both faculties. The role of intelligence is underplayed only because Simmel does not deal with any problem of life-conduct but with the very metaphysical problem of life itself. Due to the analytical nature of our thought "a contradiction arises once these parts [more-life, more-than-life] are fixed in mutual

³⁶⁶ Ibid.: 363

³⁶⁷ *ibid.*: 358

³⁶⁸ *ibid.*: 367

opposition".³⁶⁹ Bergson's theory, for example, transforms instinct and intelligence into reified categories of experience ; hence the contradictory character of his vitalism. The metaphysical conciliation of both dynamics and statics is reflected also to the domain of history. Human conduct has demonstrated that

The achievement of every structure is at once a signal to seek out another one, in which the play - necessary structure, and necessary dissatisfaction with the structure as such - is repeated. As life it needs form ; as life, it needs more than the form. (Simmel 1971: 370)

Here we get the first inklings of the circularity of human activity. Form-creating and form-overcoming (as form-destroying) is largely based on an organic and physiological conception of Life (as creation and thing-created). Transcendence as creation is the only absolute. So whereas Spengler emphasizes death as the boundary that embodies transcendence, Simmel emphasizes creation (i.e birth), as the overcoming of matter through creation of new matter. Ultimately the dualism birth-death has the same fate as the dualism between absolute and relative. As Simmel holds,

By virtue of our highest, self-transcending consciousness at any moment we are absolute above our relativity. But as the further advance of this process again relativizes that absolute, the transcendence of life appears as the true absoluteness, in which the contrast between the absolute and the relative is collapsed. (Simmel 1971: 364)

As in his purely epistemological reflections (see chapter 2) Simmel searches for the *a priori* of life, knowledge and culture. In essence the failure of logic to reconcile the two realms accounts for the tragedy not only of culture (subjective vis-a-vis objective) but also of knowledge (flux vis-a-vis constancy) and life (more-life vis-a-vis more-than-life).

Similarly, Simmel uses vitalism in order to describe the crisis of modernity. In describing a very intense cultural epoch Simmel has anticipated many of the arguments held today by postmodern writers. However despite his pessimism - accountable through the tremendous structural changes in Germany - vitalism retained the possibilities for transcendence, firstly of previous forms, secondly of the temporary formlessness which follows their destruction. The rebellion "against the principle of form"³⁷⁰ as such seems to be historically located in the period where the exhaustion of religion's utility has become either fully conscious or has been displaced (i.e materialism according to Spengler). However, Simmel would not share the pessimism of Spengler. Instead of a

³⁶⁹ *ibid.*: 369

³⁷⁰ *ibid.*: 377

rapid decline into formlessness (hence Spengler's pessimism), Simmel identified a "positive drive towards life" which inhibits the declining forms from serving their function. This incessant conflict

does not permit concentration on the creation of new forms, [but] it makes a virtue of necessity and insists on a fight against forms simply because they are forms. This is probably only possible in an epoch where cultural forms are conceived of as an exhausted soil which has yielded all that it could grow, which, however, is still completely covered by products of its former fertility. (Simmel 1971: 377)

Thus for Simmel it seems that the intense character of the crisis, caused by the absolute autonomy claimed by the previous form, i.e. religion, has prevented a new form from arising. This internal failure of religion (i.e. its claim to be a totalizing and all-encompassing structure) demanded an equally intense resolution. Hence the rebellious and anti-formal character of modern life, unlike previous epochs where the conflict was similar but of a smaller scale. The reason which generates this fragmentation and hostility against the idea of form or systematic organization of reality lies in the metaphysical relationship between life and form. Whereas life enters the domain of intellectuality and social life only through its opposite, i.e. form, form once brought into existence denies the very existence life. Life accepts its opposite, form does not. Simmel's concept of life opposes the reification of form and not the concept of form as such. Hence Simmel's moderate approach in both epistemology and cultural critique. As soon as he hypostasizes the metaphysical idea of absolute Life which encloses life and form as opposing forces, Simmel also extracts the critique of modernity along similar principles.

As I have often indicated Simmel's theory anticipates in certain respects only, postmodernism. This is so because occasionally Simmel seems to accept the need for modern man to live without referring his daily experiences to a grand-framework of social action. Yet Simmel suggested that the necessity of this situation functions only as a means for transcendence while additionally he recognized that formlessness may be only phenomenal. Here I have to quote Simmel at length :

It is a philistine prejudice that conflicts and problems are dreamt up merely for the sake of their solutions. Both in fact have additional tasks in the economy and history of life, tasks which they fulfill independently of their own solutions. Thus they exist in their own right, even if the future does not replace conflicts with their resolutions, but only replaces their forms and contents with others. In short, the present is too full of contradictions to stand still. This itself is a more fundamental change than the reformations of times past. The bridge between the past and the future of cultural forms seems to be demolished ; we gaze into an abyss of unformed life

beneath our feet. But perhaps this formlessness is itself the appropriate form for contemporary life. Thus the blueprint of life is obliquely fulfilled. Life is a struggle in the absolute sense of the term which encompasses the relative contrast between war and peace: that absolute peace which might encompass this contrast remains an eternal secret to us. (Simmel 1971: 393)

The critical moment of Western civilization that Simmel acknowledges here anticipates in a sense Spengler's pessimism and more loosely Heidegger's critique of productionist metaphysics. The reference to the functions of problems reflects Durkheim's similar rationale in his conception of the functionality of crime. In an anti-positivist formulation, Simmel points to the consequences of the incomplete solutions man gives to problems. He clothes this notion under the idea of additional functions of problems. But the transformation of one problem in its initial or partial form to another one points to the recurrence of a problem under different form or degree of intensity. However, as he notes, the excessive number of contradictions which clearly stem from the excessive inadequacy of solutions, is a noteworthy phenomenon because it has overshadowed the solutions which are necessary to either eliminate a problem altogether or to cause its change of form, therefore eliminate it only temporarily. If as he claims, there is an abundance of contradictions, then these cannot dominate life ; instead they ask to be solved or transformed, in short, they ask to be transcended as *specific* contradictions but not as the notion of contradiction as such. As Simmel notes, the attack on form as a principle emanates from "the deepest contradictions of the spirit".³⁷¹ The fact that these contradictions have taken precedence over the possibility of their solutions reflects the failure of past forms and of the current state of man as the embodiment of these failure. Here Simmel, perhaps unintendedly, approaches Nietzsche and Spengler in terms of the outcome of the present situation. The fact that the present because of its contradictory nature cannot sustain itself, posits the need for transcendence or overcoming. This argument is reinforced by the assumption that the relationship between past and future forms has been abolished, therefore the nature of new forms will probably differ from the one we have hitherto known. In this sense, Simmel is preaching Nietzsche's concept of the Overman as the qualitative change, or perhaps evolution, into a higher type of order. The vision of "the unformed life" corresponds to the critical phase of transition that modern technological humanity has already entered. However, this "unformed life" or "formlessness" does not dissolve social action into lawlessness ; it is rather presented through its opposite. Thus, modern life manifests itself as formlessness through the *form*

³⁷¹ *ibid.*: 393

of formlessness. But if formlessness is a form and claims domination over the whole of social life then it is bound to collapse and be overcome. If we have reached the stage where formlessness gives us a glimpse of life in its naked purity, then life shall cloth itself with a more orderly scheme and present itself as form. The possibility and realization of formlessness denotes the failure of the current cultural form of life, namely technology. The fact that all entities have been stripped of their authenticity and present themselves only as instrumental values, as Heidegger claims, legitimizes the idea of formlessness only as decadence. Here we reach once again Simmel's argument in *The Ruin* and Spengler's more pessimistic diagnosis. The difference lies in the alternative that those critics of modernity offer : Nietzsche resorts to the will-to-power, Simmel succumbs to agnosticism as to the specific character of the coming order, Spengler's cyclic option foresees a return to neo-tribalism while Heidegger's escape lies in the domain of art and authentic experience of entities.

In an ostensible capitulation to Idealism, Simmel laments the impossibility of eternal harmony. However the impossibility or secret as he terms it, of this realization has as a consequence the impossibility of the realization of its opposite as well : absolute chaos. In metaphorical and poetic language he terms these opposites "peace" and "war". The inability of their absolute attainability, establishes the dynamic of life and the perpetual interaction between the two. Whether this interaction or conflict is going to be partially alleviated through the overcoming of one moral order - Nietzsche's Christianity, Spengler's Civilization or Heidegger's productionist metaphysics - by another and in what way, remains to be seen. What is particularly significant though is that those thinkers did realize the futility of the search for the All or the One. Their perspectivism is sufficient enough to establish and sustain a moral order without transforming the illusion of its totality to totality itself. By contrast, postmodern thinkers are essentially Schopenhauer's and Stirner's disciples rather than Nietzsche's or Simmel's. Their idealist façade collapses as soon as disappointment emerges through their encounter with any form which, since it is never absolute, leaves their quest for totality unsatisfied. What follows is the resort to the kind of sterile egotism and solipsism that characterizes the modern life we experience through their advocacy.

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