Simmel’s Theory of Alienation and the Decline of the Nonrational*

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By any standard, nonrationality is an undertheorized concept in sociology. This paper attempts to open a discussion on nonrationality by analyzing one of the most fruitful theorizations of the concept: Simmel’s. Simmel developed a theory that placed nonrationality on the same plane with rationality and attributed to the former a role as fundamental as the latter’s in the foundations of action, and as central as the latter’s in the generation of existential meanings. The gradual eclipse of the nonrational elements of life in the expanses of a modern, highly rationalized world imply, then, an impoverishment of being. I argue that Simmel’s theory of the nonrational can serve as a model capable of enriching our understanding of society and of the person and can, in this sense, serve as a counterpoint to current sociological theories that emphasize the rational elements of life and conceive the person in primarily rational terms.

INTRODUCTION

In the last chapter of The Philosophy of Money ([1907] 1978) Georg Simmel formulates a theory of alienation according to which the gradual impoverishment of personal life is a consequence of the growing separation between objective and subjective culture, or else of the progressive disconnection between the objective and subjective conditions of work. As a result of the division of labor, Simmel claims, the artifacts that constitute the objectified outcomes of people’s activities multiply and diversify. The relative number of cultural objects that any one person can incorporate into his or her self therefore decreases. Objective culture, then, becomes increasingly complex, and the degree in which it becomes alive in individuals lessens. It becomes remote and inaccessible, and the life contents of people become ambiguous and fragmentary.

Moreover, because the division of labor provokes a fragmentation of the productive process, the objects that we create lose the unity needed for them to become meaningful to us ([1907] 1978:454ff.). An object is existentially meaningful, Simmel tells us, only when we can project our self into the object in question, when subject and object are congruent. Whenever it becomes impossible to produce something whole, the proper connection between subject and object fades. The artifacts that we produce gain significance no longer from their association with a productive subject, but only through their connection with other objects of a similar nature. “Where the division of labour prevails,” Simmel writes ([1907] 1978:455), “the achievement becomes incommensurable with the performer; the person can no longer find himself expressed in his work; its form becomes dissimilar to the subjective mind and appears only as a wholly specialized part of our being that is indifferent to the total unity of man.”

These two separations—between objective and subjective culture and between objective

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and subjective conditions of labor—generate, then, a similar effect. Although distinct, both processes provoke an increased detachment of the vital energies that constitute the essence of our being from the objective forms that are supposed to channel and embody the fruit of our activities. Furthermore, these processes transform the ways in which we apprehend the world. Because an object now attains meaning only by virtue of its association with other objects, our perception of things depends on principles for which the objective and the rational play the most important part. The mind itself becomes rational and the calculating character of rationality becomes the form of our consciousness.

Clearly stated in The Philosophy of Money, these ideas are widely discussed in much of the current scholarship on Simmel (e.g., Frisby 1981, 1984, 1986; Levine 1980; Oakes 1980, 1984), and, differences of language and analytical framework apart, they do not differ much from similar arguments in the works of Weber or Marx. Little attention has been devoted, however, to a further dimension that Simmel associates with the idea of alienation: the loss of our nonrational capabilities. According to Simmel, rationalization is logically accompanied by a weakening of the nonrational—a movement that, in itself, has made us lose something of the existential significance of life. In this paper, I clarify this notion.

The definition of the nonrational as a capacity, as a fundamental condition of being which the growth of the rational makes increasingly difficult to express, contrasts with the prevailing concepts of the rational and the nonrational in sociology today. Although many disagree significantly about the specifics of the terms, to sociologists rationality and nonrationality are attributes of action, not of persons. To Parsons ([1937] 1968:60ff.) and Alexander (1982:72ff.), for instance, the terms must be understood primarily in an instrumental sense, denoting the extent to which action is or is not guided by considerations of pure efficiency. But to ethnomethodologists, probably the major advocates for a theory of the nonrational, nonrationality results from the impossibility of achieving the necessary conditions for rational action (see Heritage 1987). Rational choice theorists’ focus on rationality derives from an emphasis on goal orientation—a characteristic of action, not people. Indeed, but for a few exceptions—the most telling being Weber’s image of the person underlying his concept of “affective action” (Weber [1956] 1978:25)—men and women are seen as basically rational, calculative beings: people who have transformed calculation into the essence of action, or who put calculation to the service of some normative end, or who, for all of their calculative predispositions, can never know enough to achieve fully rational action. In all these cases, the person becomes someone for whom the a priori, logical structures of the mind are the fundamental action-orienting structures of the inner being.

To Simmel, on the other hand, the rationality-bearing intellect—what he identifies as the mind—is only one of several such structures. Because they are as fundamental as the intellect and have an equally a priori relation to action, Simmel suggests (e.g., [n.d.] 1959; [1921–22] 1984), we must pay attention to such nonrationality-bearing elements of our

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1 For practical purposes, I henceforth speak of “the” rational and “the” nonrational. This is not to suggest that Simmel holds that there is only one kind of rationality or nonrationality, or that there is something that we can call “the rational” or “the nonrational.” His writings, in fact, present several notions of rationality and nonrationality, different people and different states of affairs entailing different types of rationality and nonrationality. As I note, the emotions, faith, and aesthetics represent different types of nonrationality, none being reducible to the others. My main concern in this paper is with the type of nonrationality instantiated by the emotions, and my repeated reference to the nonrational has to be, for the most part, limited to that type. A detailed discussion of the concepts of rationality and nonrationality in Simmel is beyond the bounds of this paper.

2 Indeed, it is interesting that although Weber discusses four types of action, American sociologists have focused almost exclusively on the two types of action grounded on rationality. Traditional and affectual action would seem to belong mostly to realms of study outside sociology. For an insightful analysis of nonrationality in Weber, and for a possible explanation of the absence of a theory of the nonrational in American sociology in general, see Sica (1988).
inner lives as emotions, faith, or our ability to appreciate beauty. None of these should be considered simple epiphenomena of the intellect. Rationality and nonrationality, then, should be seen not only as attributes of action, but, first, as attributes of the person. To Simmel, action is not rational or nonrational because of some objective criterion of rationality, of some principle derived from the internal logic of action itself, but, rather, because of the particular elements of a person’s inner life—his or her intellect, emotions, faith, or aesthetic sensibility—that come to orient practice. According to Simmel, the nonrational is a primary, essential element of “life,” an integral aspect of our humanity. Its gradual eclipse in the expanses of a modern, highly rationalized world implies, then, an unquestionable impoverishment of being.

From the viewpoint of contemporary sociology, Simmel’s claim is in fact doubly problematic: not only does it entail a conception of the rational and the nonrational that, pace Weber, in its most basic assumption differs from current conceptions, but it does so by adducing an admittedly philosophical idea. The notion that the person is vested with an essentially nonrational “nature,” intrinsic in what Simmel calls the “soul,” is indeed an idea grounded in the metaphysics of German Idealism—not exactly what sociologists would consider an appropriate grounding for sociology. But on this account Simmel’s position is no different from that of sociologists in general. The attribution of an exclusive role to the intellect in the orientation of action is no less metaphysically loaded than Simmel’s notion of nonrationality. It is indeed with the metaphysics of the Enlightenment that the idea of the person as an essentially rational being—sometimes successfully putting his or her rationality to work, sometimes being simply misguided—must be associated. The suggestion that this particular conception is not metaphysical because it yields testable hypotheses is clearly fallacious. The concept of a rational being serves as a model from which different theories of action can be constructed and then tested. This role, I suggest, can also be assigned to Simmel’s concept of the human being. The power of our current model does not derive from any truth-value inherent in it but from its efficacy in generating understanding. Indeed, it is to this same test that we should subject Simmel’s.

In this paper, I present Simmel’s theory of the nonrational as a model that can enrich our understanding of society and of the person. True, based on a different concept of the rational such an understanding might ultimately prove incommensurable with the interpretive frameworks weighing on the field today. But its value must be determined in terms of whether we can do better interpretative work if we consider Simmel on the nonrational than if we don’t—and only in these terms. I suggest that Simmel’s focus on the nonrational can help us theorize on aspects of reality that the rationality-based theories cannot. While

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3 For an excellent discussion of this point, see Kaern (1985).

4 This argument, developed by Arthur Stinchcombe with regard the theory of rational action (Stinchcombe 1988), is in fact fully congruent with much of the post-Kuhnian philosophy of science (see, for instance, Kuhn 1970; Lakatos and Musgrave 1970; Toulmin 1972; Feyerabend 1975; Laudan 1977; Hesse 1978; Gutting 1980). The idea that we work with a presupposition-free core of explanatory theories from which knowledge grows linearly, reflecting the objective state of things “out there,” is no longer persuasive. Instead, an awareness that the very core of our theoretical understanding is inevitably shaped by extrascientific considerations, and that even the most empirical of our findings are inevitably constituted by our theories, has taken hold of our conception of science. Imre Lakatos’s redefinition of a scientific paradigm as a research program, as a constantly changing cluster of interconnected theories composed of an irrefutable core that gives the program its substance and of a multiplicity of “auxiliary” hypotheses that have to bear the brunt of test (Lakatos 1970:132–135), provides a seminal example of the attempt to integrate the awareness of extrascientific permeation with a rigorous notion of scientific practice. Mary Hesse’s formulation of a “pragmatic criterion” as the only viable criterion to evaluate knowledge (1978) represents, on the other hand, a groundbreaking attempt to reconceive theoretical validity in light of the impossibility to separate fact from theory.

5 A fact that, as Donald Levine has pointed out repeatedly (e.g., 1980:xxx, 1989a:116), seems not to have gone unnoticed by Parsons. Indeed, according to Levine, it is precisely because Parsons recognized the incommensurability between Simmel’s sociology and his own, not because of any kind of dislike, that he did not discuss Simmel in The Structure of Social Action.
mainstream approaches are indisputably fit to interpret such phenomena as the behavior of organizations, structures of mobility, or scientific innovation, entire areas of reality remain off the limits of their conceptual net; their study is consigned to the margins of the discipline. That these involve the very areas that Simmel associates with the nonrational—faith, aesthetics, the emotions—is, of course, no accident.

I show how Simmel’s theory of the nonrational yields a language that, when properly extended, sheds a new light on our understanding of one of these areas: the emotions. I discuss two of Simmel’s basic concepts, distance and mediation, and sketch his argument through a detailed exploration of what he sees as one of the quintessential nonrational phenomena, love.\footnote{For a detailed analysis of Simmel on love, see Oakes 1989.}

In the next section, I clarify the notion of the nonrational in Simmel’s writings. Then I analyze the concepts of mediation and distance and the historical dimension that Simmel attaches to them. I conclude by discussing the contributions of Simmel’s sociological theory of the nonrational, and show how this theory can indeed be extended to yield a sociology of the emotions.

DEFINING THE NONRATIONAL

In his essay On Love ([1921–22] 1984), published posthumously, Simmel gives us numerous indications of what he means when he speaks of the nonrational. Love, he writes, for instance, “is a completely nonrational phenomenon that resists the categories of logic” ([1921–22] 1984:155, my emphasis); it involves a relationship that exists “in complete independence from all practical and theoretical considerations, and from all judgments of real value as well” ([1921–22] 1984:158); it is something that arises “from the completely nonrational depths of life” ([1921–22] 1984:158, my emphasis). Love, he tells us, constitutes an epiphenomenon of the nonrational, of the genuinely impulsive, of that condition in which subject and object come to form a total unity ([1921–22] 1984:156). For Simmel, to love means to be connected with another person in such a way that, while still maintaining their own individualities, the loving person and the loved one totally permeate one another. It means to apprehend the other directly and entirely. It means that no social or cultural object lies between the lover and the beloved, that no element of the intellect plays any part in the experience of loving. To him, indeed, love is one of the formative categories of life. Like knowledge, faith, and valuation, it is “one configuration of the fundamental relationship between the soul and the world” ([1921–22] 1984:159). It is a “pure quality” that emerges from an inner territory of being that cannot be reduced to, or subsumed into, any other category of life ([1921–22] 1984:158ff.; [1921] 1971e:244, 248; see also Oakes 1989:231–237).

These ideas certainly are not new. The affirmation of the nonrational and the stress on the experiential authenticity of love have been at the core of the Romantic program as a whole—which during the nineteenth century was at least as influential as the rational program of the Enlightenment. Simmel’s contribution lies not in the originality of these ideas but in the particular way he develops them, and in the subsequent sociological formulation in which he couches and extends them further. Central to Simmel’s project is the development of the epistemological consequences of the Romantic program to their

\footnote{Here, as elsewhere, I have changed Oakes’s “irrational,” used in the original translation, for “nonrational.” Oakes’s is an accurate translation of the German text, yet the term “irrational” involves so many connotations in the intellectual discourse of today that I believe “nonrational” conveys better the essence of Simmel’s thought. For a clarification of my use of “love,” see note 11 below.}
Indeed, the Romantic conception of love implies an alternative to the transcendental philosophy of Kant that Simmel would exploit fully (see Kaern 1985, 1989; Loiskandl, Weinstein, and Weinstein 1986). For love, or rather that of which love is but an expression, becomes in Simmel, explicitly and in itself, a priori—an irreducible, preconstitutive element of the perceptual frame in whose terms we understand the world and orient our actions. It becomes an epistemic element analogous and parallel to the logical a priori of Kant. This a priori should not be conflated with the emotions: Although it is a premise to the emotions, and although love seems to achieve a sort of congruence with it, it is not one with the emotions. At its root is the experience of experiencing itself, of the direct linkage of subject and object at its moment of actual occurrence—of life in its more purely vitalistic, Schopenhauerian sense. Simmel sees love, and the emotions in general, as being in a similar relation to this a priori as the fruits of the intellect are to Kant’s a priori. But more important is the fact that Simmel sees this other, irreducible category of being as playing a role in the processes of meaning formation similar to the a priori of Kant: The structure of sensibilities that follows from it forms, together with the intellect, an epistemic order in which the rational and the nonrational coalesce. For Simmel, in what amounts to a transformation of both Kant and Romanticism, knowing involves an interpretive filtering of experience determined, together and dialectically, by the intellectual categories of our mind and by the sentient categories of our soul. To him, the a posteriori comprises not a dualism but a synthesis of rationality and nonrationality that comes into being in human practice.

This is not the place to develop in detail Simmel’s theory of knowledge. That the above requires some clarification becomes evident, for instance, when we attempt to comprehend better the idea of the dialectics upon which the argument rests. It is clearly not enough to suggest, for example, that the a posteriori involves a “synthesis” of rationality and nonrationality. Simmel’s approach would seem to involve a notion in which everything merges into everything, leaving us, in analytical terms, at the point at which the philosophical tradition leading to Kant began. Of course, Simmel answers this question, the power of the approach that ensues becoming apparent when we place it in the context of much of what is being done in the sociology of the emotions today. Indeed, as an increasing body of research shows (e.g., Denzin 1984; Hochschild 1983; Kempter 1978; and for a most enlightening study of love, Swidler forthcoming), feelings seem to depend greatly on the conceptual definitions that we attach to them—a fact that supports Simmel’s concept of a dialectical a posteriori, and which, as I suggest below, can be theorized accordingly. But this I discuss later. At this point it is to the questions of action and alienation that we should turn. For now we are in a better position to understand Simmel’s notion of nonrational action, its connection to an idea of alienation, and the role played by the concept of distance in his formulation of a sociological theory of the nonrational.

To Simmel, nonrational action is action that issues from the direct experiencing of objects and finds its existential opposite in the intellectual experience of things. It is irrelevant...
whether we call “love” the feelings that arise in this way to connect with some other.\footnote{\ It is clear that my use of “love” is purely heuristic. It provides me, and Simmel, with a means to introduce an idea of the nonrational—nonrationality, as is becoming quite obvious, by definition defying the possibilities of direct study.} The significant point lies in the association that Simmel establishes between nonrationality and the condition that, at least theoretically, he perceives as the antithesis to alienation. Indeed, whereas Simmel defines alienation as a growing separation between subject and object, he conceives the nonrational as what makes possible the sensibly direct, conceptually unmediated attribution of meaning to an object. According to Simmel, when we “love” someone, when we connect with an individual nonrationally, we attach to that person a meaning that derives from experiencing him or her as a whole. Then and only then we capture the existential essence of that other in a manner bereft of any intervening factor (Simmel \[1921–22\] 1984:164–165). Then and only then we become “one” with him or her without neutralizing the inner particularity of either the I or the Thou (\[1921–22\] 1984:155).

Intellectual experience is, in this sense, externally mediated experience. For Simmel, the intellect is the aspect of our being that makes possible our conscious knowledge of the world (\[1907\] 1978:429). If we know how to do something—how to go from one place to another, how to socialize with people, how to buy a book—it is only because we possess an intellect, a more or less precise image of the connections between the different elements of the world encompassed in the reality of our travel, social life, or shopping.

As Simmel puts it, “the intellect is the mediator through which volition adjusts itself to independent being” (\[1907\] 1978:430, emphasis added). It comprises a universe of concepts that helps us organize reality and act in the world. It is a \textit{means} or, more correctly, an image of the means—the processes and artifacts; the car, the streets, the principles of driving, the laws of traffic, and so on—with which we accomplish things in society. Clearly, in the intellect lie the grounds from which arises the rational, our capacity to act in the most appropriate manner to achieve a given purpose. But, Simmel tells us, this form of connecting with an object presupposes the existence of something between self and object, something that pertains to the objectified world of cultural artifacts and not to the actual unity of subject and object. The oneness of nonrational experience, therefore, becomes an impossibility (\[1921–22\] 1984:160–165; also, \[1921\] 1971e:239ff.).\footnote{\ The difficulty that most people show when asked to \textit{talk} about love (see Swidler, forthcoming) would seem to nicely support Simmel in this regard.}

Nonrational and intellectual experience, then, present the two poles of a continuum of which the relative \textit{distance} between subject and object constitutes its main variable.

Simmel does not identify the nonrational with pure will. For him, the will is not an inner source of action but a condition for its actualization, both the rational and the nonrational requiring the existence of a will to be activated. It is only through an act of will that we can set our inner energies, both intellectual and emotional, in motion. The will determines the goals that the intellect is brought to accomplish. Even an intellect possessing a perfect knowledge of the appropriate means to achieve a purpose is still unable “to transpose them into reality,” as Simmel writes, unless this purpose has been previously triggered by a will (\[1907\] 1978:429). And the same is true regarding the nonrational, for prior to the connecting act that forms the essence of “love” the soul has to be triggered by an impulse \textit{for} “loving” that cannot be explained except as a fruit of the will (\[1921–22\] 1984:163).

Simmel thus posits a perfect parallelism between the mind and the soul, each being as ontologically fundamental as the other, each existing in a situation of mere potentiality until set in motion by the will and each occupying an equally basic role with respect to action. Moreover, according to Simmel, the two are equally important for the development of our personality and equally necessary to the inner integration of our selves. Indeed, to become
whole human beings, Simmel claims, we have to nurture both our minds and our souls and, somehow, strike a balance between them. For him, however, the thrust toward rationalization that characterizes modern societies has brought about a significant increase in the distance between subjects and objects, from which follows a deepening disequilibrium in the possibility of expressing our inner energies.

DISTANCE, MEDIATION, AND ESTRANGEMENT

Toward the end of The Philosophy of Money ([1907] 1978:470–477), Simmel defines the concept of distance. Imagine, he suggests, an arrangement of life’s elements in a circle, the individual at its center. “Whatever our object may be,” he writes, “it can, with its content remaining unchanged, move closer to the centre or to the periphery of our sphere of interests and concerns” ([1907] 1978:472). The relationships between a self and an object can be therefore characterized “by the illustrative symbol of a definite or changing distance between the two... whereby the diversity of the innermost relationship to objects (not only in distinctness, but also in the quality and whole character of the images received) is interpreted as a diversity in our distance from them” ([1907] 1978:472–473, emphasis added).

“Distance,” then, is a heuristic concept that helps us conceive the connection between subject and object in relative, variable terms.

Simmel shows the value of this scheme, for instance, in his essay on The Stranger ([1908b] 1971c), where he relates the circumstances surrounding estrangement to the concrete incidence of social distance. As Simmel sees it, social distance is a function of the quality of the mediators through which a person perceives a particular social relation ([1908b] 1971c:146–147; see also Levine 1977). It is an expression of the extent to which the attributes connecting two or more people in a relationship are perceived to be unique to that relationship. “The stranger is close to us,” Simmel writes, “insofar as we feel between him and ourselves similarities of nationality or social position, of occupation or of general human nature. He is far from us insofar as these similarities extend beyond him and us, and connect us only because they connect a great many people” ([1908b] 1971c:147).

Social distance does not derive from the absence of common traits but from the more abstract nature of these traits ([1908b] 1971c:146). Remoteness, that is, does not set in because people have nothing in common, but because the things they have in common, or have become, too common. Likewise, nearness results not from an absence of similarities but from the specificity and exclusivity of these similarities.

At its ideal state, nearness becomes the equivalent of “love.” Like love, to be perfectly close to someone implies apprehending that person without introducing between the I and the other meanings that extend beyond I and other. In this sense, nearness implies the sharing of what we could call existentially generated meanings. These meanings surely exist only in relation to some other, nondistinctive meanings that make them seem distinctive. But their particularity can be explained only as emerging from the direct, exclusive link between the people involved. To the extent that we can still see these meanings as deriving from some common trait, particularization implies endowing this trait with a new meaning—cleansing it, as it were, of any attribute ofordinariness.

Simmel suggests that nearness and remoteness and feelings of specificity and commonness are found in all relationships, the proportion of each varying from case to case. More critically, Simmel suggests that distance varies over time, its ratio changing as the specific qualities that bind a group together acquire or lose commonness. Simmel sees all relation-

13 For a discussion of the connection between love and distance, see also Oakes 1989:234–235.
ships, including those founded on love itself, as given to change along this continuum ([1908b] 1971c:147).

Distance and estrangement, Simmel observes, can and often do enter our most intimate relationships ([1908b] 1971c:147). When we are in love we believe our beloved, our emotion, our relationship to be unique. Yet the exclusivity that we feel is prone to weaken; consequently, a measure of estrangement might establish itself. We may come to think that everybody has had the same experience, that it acquires the same aura of uniqueness for everyone, that we might achieve the same kind of closeness with a number of different people ([1908b] 1971c:147). Then the original relationship becomes increasingly generalized and, in terms of the inner faculties of our being at work, increasingly intellectualized. Love loses its unmediated, nonrational character, and both the emotion and the object of love come to be interpreted in terms that are alien to the inner experience of the self.14

MODERNIZATION AND THE DECLINE OF THE NONRATIONAL

Simmel grounds his theory of alienation and the decline of the nonrational on a historical understanding of social distance. For Simmel, social distance is not only a microstructural phenomenon: The increased rationalization of modern cultures has produced an irreversible increment of distance within the social structure at its most general. Rationalization breeds a growing number of identities and in this sense provides individuals with more means to establish relations of nearness. Yet it has also transformed the once purely situational occurrence of remoteness and estrangement into an integral element of the social structure.

Like Marx, Simmel associates the emergence of capitalism with a reduction in our potential to establish unmediated relations with people and objects. But for Simmel, production is not the critical element of economic practice. Because for him a society is no more than the sum of interactions that take place within it ([1908a] 1971b:23–24), we also have to understand the economic in terms of the interactions that give body to its activities ([1907] 1978:83–84). Exchange, rather than production, thus becomes the fundamental element of economic practice ([1907] 1978:ch. 1). In Simmel's view, the economy has certainly become an impersonal, macrostructural system, but it has only become so. The question is to understand why such a transformation occurred, and how this changed the existential experiences of people.

Simmel addresses the question by comparing the structures of action in modern and premodern societies. Premodern forms of activity, he suggests, are characterized by the presence of simple series of aspirations whose satisfaction requires a limited number of means ([1907] 1978:430). There are, then, direct needs and specific methods to satisfy them, each goal being unambiguously defined and linked to a concrete set of means. Simmel asks us to compare the efforts of premodern peoples to obtain food with our own. To them, he argues, the procurement of food constitutes a directly experienced activity with a specific point of satisfaction; to us it represents but one point of a multilinked complex of ends for which no one specific set of means exists ([1907] 1978:430). “Under [traditional] circumstances,” Simmel writes, “the conception and enjoyment of final goals is relatively frequent; the awareness of objective connections and of reality, that is intellectualty, operates less frequently than emotional connotations which characterize both the immediate conception

14 The affinities between Simmel's ideas and Weber's concepts of enchantment and disenchantment are obvious, yet the concepts refer to phenomena of a different order. Enchantment is the experience of reality that follows the attribution of "mysterious incalculable forces" (Weber 1946:139) to the origin and workings of things. Disenchantment is the loss of mystery and the fact produced by intellectualization by which "one can, in principle, master all things by calculation" (Weber 1946:139). As I discuss below, Simmel's alienation and loss of the nonrational refer to a transformation of the relation between means and ends in a society.
as well as the real emergence of final purposes” ([1907] 1978:430). That is to say, the potential to create a unity with objects is greater, and action acquires, more often than not, a strictly nonrational character. Clearly, too, as the number of ends decreases, Simmel suggests, so decreases the likelihood that action would acquire a strictly nonrational character.

Simmel’s language suggests that the nonrational, which I have been discussing as something homogeneous, in fact takes a variety of actual expressions. Unmediated action is indeed guided by a number of different “emotional connotations,” each attached to an independent goal. Nonrationality, in turn, is a form of behavior that follows “emotional reactions and decisions” ([1907] 1978:431, emphases added on the plural), each with a distinctive content. Indeed, the nonrational should not be reduced to love. For Simmel, there is love and hatred, empathy and envy, respect and contempt, each representing a different form in which the nonrational comes into being.

But the decline of the nonrational does not depend only on a reduction in the number of ends in a society. Although the immediate can be experienced in its directness, Simmel believes that emotional connotations are more likely to be experienced in conjunction with connotations of an intellectual character. As I have already suggested, for him the a posteriori is more often neither completely rational nor completely nonrational but a combination of the two, emerging only in actual practice. What we call emotions are not, for the most part, expressions of pure nonrationality. They are indeed expressions of different combinations between the experience of the immediate and intellectuality ([1921–22] 1984:162–166). As much of the sociology of emotions seems to suggest, they are subjective concretizations of the connection between subjects and objects as mediated to varying degrees by nonrational intellectuality.

Simmel gives an example of this when explaining the difference between love and respect ([1921–22] 1984:164). In empirical terms, “love” is the fruit of a conceptually unmediated, existentially direct, purely subjective link between two persons. Respect, on the other hand, arises when something that Simmel calls a “general quality of worthiness” ([1921–22] 1984:164)—a value that exists in our objective culture and that can be ascribed to a large number of people—is interposed in the connection between the I and the other. Like love, respect involves the existence of an emotion toward a person, except that the emotion is mediated by a cultural value partially defining its content. Like love, it is particularized to a degree. Yet our feeling is neither completely direct nor purely subjective—and neither is the action that originates in it, therefore, strictly nonrational.

In this sense, the emotions or, rather, some emotional connotations are a partial product of the intellect. And indeed, according to Simmel, if social distance has become such a pervasive property of modern societies it is not only because the number of goals available to people has decreased. It is also because our experiencing of the emotions has become increasingly intellectualized.

Simmel sees this double transformation as the result of a series of mutually reinforcing developments associated with the rise of modernity—particularly the emergence of a market economy and of the modern metropolis.

It is the almost exclusive reliance on the use of money as the means of exchange within markets, for example, that Simmel suggests changes the nature of the means-end relation characteristic of premodern societies ([1907] 1978:430–431). It transforms the previously unconnected series of activity into one all-encompassing system in which nothing is either the first or the last element. The consequences of such a transformation are indeed paradoxical: While purely nonrational contents fade and an increasingly intellectual, ultimately alienating experience of reality sets in, the points at which the rational and the nonrational intersect multiply. While emotionality weakens, that is, the number of emotions...
grows. Because our experiences become more and more mediated by objective constructs, emotionality indeed weakens. Yet precisely because experience becomes increasingly mediated, the connotations achieved by the emotions diversify—bringing into being an unquestionably weaker but more diverse experience of emotionality (I shall return to this idea in a moment).

The very objectification of economic exchange illustrates the movement toward the intellectual. With the spread of money as its primary means, exchange itself becomes an abstract activity devoid of any tangible end. "Money," Simmel argues, "is concerned only with what is common to all, i.e., with the exchange value which reduces all quality and individuality to a purely quantitative level" ([1903] 1971a:326). In traditional settings, Simmel tells us, producer and purchaser enter into direct, face-to-face interaction. Their personalities are necessarily engaged in the exchange, and the excitation of subjective feelings thus becomes unavoidable. The emergence of abstract forms of economic interaction, on the other hand, facilitates production for entirely unknown purchasers ([1903] 1971a:327). Consequently, the other comes to be perceived as an object, an impersonal member of a no less impersonal category of buyers or producers (see also [1907] 1978:457).

As Simmel sees it, then, the objectification of exchange provokes an irreversible expansion of social distance in society—a distance that, although made more puzzling by the multiplication of emotional responses it makes possible, takes further expression in, and is further reinforced by, the subsequent intellectualization of the a posteriori. People are deprived of their specificity, of their subjective concreteness, and therefore become "objects," impersonal entities with no individual meaning. They come to perceive one another primarily in utilitarian terms and lose their capacity to create direct, authentic relationships with others. And all this happens in such a way that this new form of being in the world becomes ingrained in people's personalities. Objectivity comes to constitute the tenor of their expressive intents ([1907] 1978:443–446).

The growth of the modern metropolis produces similar effects. On one hand, cities offer the distinctive environment in which money can evolve ([1903] 1971a:326–327). On the other, they provide the grounds on which rational social types arise. In the modern city, Simmel explains, production is geared towards an unknown, abstract, generalized public ([1903] 1971a:327). There, exchange develops into an objective transaction, and the interpersonal conditions for the development of a money economy materialize. The intensity of stimuli that characterizes the modern metropolis, on the other hand, helps form the psychological structures of the rational ([1903] 1971a:325). The fragmentation, rapidity, and diversity of life in the city demand an adaptation that, paradoxically, helps develop one's intellectual capacities, not one's potential for nonrational involvement. As Simmel explains, it is relatively easy to change our intellectual picture of the world; it is more difficult to change, however little, our emotional predispositions ([1903] 1971a:325). We are therefore led to channel more and more of our experiences through the workings of our minds, doing our best to protect ourselves from severe emotional disruptions ([1903] 1971a:326). We isolate our innermost being from the oscillations and disjunctions of the external world, we
inhibit our feelings, and we come to touch everything from a distance. We are once again led to forge a primarily intellectual attitude toward things, to invest more and more of the nonrational with the rational, and to create and recreate an essentially rational mode of being in the world ([1903] 1971a:326).

DISCUSSION: THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE PERSON

To Simmel, then, distance grows as the money economy develops, as cities expand, and, in general, as “life” moves from being a whole embedded with emotionality to becoming a system governed by the intellect. The potential for unmediated experience recedes, and something that is an integral part of our humanity appears to be forever lost. It is this thought that informs Simmel’s later and, it should be admitted, pessimistic work. Simmel, moving increasingly close to existential philosophy, came to see the cultural transformation just described as a disastrous outcome of modernization (see, especially, [1918] 1976b). Because of the ever-growing rationalization of action, he claimed, we are increasingly and irreversibly prevented from establishing authentic relationships with people or objects. In becoming rational we lose the nonrational, and with it we lose, as the existentialists see it, the most meaningful of our human attributes: our authenticity.

Clearly, intellectuality can be perceived in more positive terms. As Weber ([1922] 1964) argued, for instance, the integrative effects of the religions of salvation, which are historical manifestations of urban intellectuality, may serve as an antidote to societal fragmentation, thus substantially reducing the alienating consequences of urbanization. While intellectuality sows the seeds of rationality and therefore transforms the conditions of being of the person, and in this sense produces many of the consequences that Simmel outlines, for Weber intellectuality also provides the mechanisms to overcome its more detrimental effects. In fact, Simmel is fully aware that the growth of detachment, one of the obvious concomitants of distance, produces a structural condition leading not only to alienation but also to freedom. It is, I believe, unnecessary to elaborate this point. Freedom is the main asset of strangers, an asset emerging from the very objectivity that characterizes their social situation ([1908b] 1971c). Cultural objectivization, we know, too, produces a multiplication of social spheres, which in turn frees the individual from the obligations due to membership in an emotionally bounded group (e.g., [1890] 1976a, [1908c] 1971d). Money alienates yet liberates the mind from the directionality of ends, making, as we have seen, any end attainable (see also Spykman 1966:219–232). Cities render life insensible, but as Sennett shows in a book that owes many of its insights to Simmel (Sennett 1970), they also make it richer, fresher, indeed kaleidoscopic.

It is characteristic of Simmel, and fully compatible with his dialectical perception of reality, to view all sociation in terms of logical opposites. As Coser put it, “to Simmel, sociation always involves harmony and conflict, attraction and repulsion, love and hatred” (1965:11; emphasis in the original). Simmel’s world is not a world of absolutes, of crystalline transparencies; it is a world of paradoxes, of shades and ambiguities, both social and moral. And, to an extent, the movement to intellectuality entails such an ambivalence, for it brings into being a reality in which the individual experiences both the anguish of alienation and the exhilaration of freedom, the weakening of emotional life and the multiplication of its connotations.19

Yet it is the vision of the threatening and alienating reality that permeates Simmel’s work in the most fundamental sense. The realization that neither the growth of freedom nor the multiplication of the emotions can make up for the loss of the nonrational ultimately

19 For a study that stresses this aspect of Simmel’s sociology, see Levine 1990.
informs Simmel’s entire social theorizing. According to Simmel, with the decline of our nonrational capabilities part of our authenticity disappears and the wholeness of the ego breaks up. And neither effect, he suggests again and again, can be overridden by our gain in self-determination or by the new plurality of feeling. If the world becomes more complex and in some sense even richer, if it opens to us in ways unknown before, our inner experiential scope nonetheless decreases. If mediated by a larger number of intellectual contents, the variety of our emotions increases, their intensity weakens irremediably, and the meaning of being human consequently changes—for the worse.

Whether or not we agree with this last conclusion, whether we define the change as a loss or as a transformation that is neither positive nor negative, depends as much on a value judgment as on an acceptance of Simmel’s theoretical assumptions. Simmel’s conclusion depends on his belief, grounded in his original definition of the person and further reinforced by the basic tenets of existentialism, that authenticity is an essential, if not the essential, element of life—and its weakening therefore becomes a real tragedy for humanity. This is a vision that, although made explicit only in his last writings, can be seen in gestation in Simmel’s earlier works. It would be incorrect to explain Simmel’s pessimism merely as the reaction of a man disillusioned with life, as he arguably was to become. Rather, this view seems to follow organically ideas that Simmel formulated, as we have seen, much earlier. It is in The Philosophy of Money, a work first published in 1900, as much as in the essay On Love where the decline of the nonrational is presented as a loss. And it is in the earlier work where we first learn that only in the unity of subject and object (or of two subjects) can genuine relationships form and a self become whole. Instead of a sharp discontinuity of thought, we see an elaboration of the earlier ideas to their logical and moral conclusion. It is no accident, indeed, that six decades after Simmel published his masterwork Goffman would still be celebrating the coming of the individual; yet after removing all its masks, which are mere intellectual constructs, he would find nothing—no individual, no authenticity, no self, nothing at all (see Fontana 1980).

But to agree or disagree with Simmel does not take anything away from the analysis on which the conclusion rests. While clearly rooted in Simmel’s theoretical assumptions, the transformation can be construed as a loss, as a movement from authentic to unauthentic existence, only from within the frame of existentialist thought, from within a discourse that places the concept of authenticity at its core. In that case, the conclusion is unavoidable, as are the vastly reactionary politics that it implies. But this is true only if we accept the valuation of authenticity; if we do not, we are left with a theory of transformation to which no judgment of value is attached. In this case, it is the probability of its actual occurrence that becomes the key evaluative criterion. We might still show some skepticism, but now the credibility of the theory depends on the empirical validity of the transformation it submits and on the understanding that it helps to produce, not on questions of morality or philosophy.

Indeed, what emerges from the above is, as I argued at the beginning of the paper, a different avenue for understanding reality, a different ground for theorizing, which originates in Simmel’s radically different assumptions about rationality and nonrationality. Emerging is an original theory of the transformation of the self—a theory that is as much a counterpoint to the likes of Foucault and Elias as it is a challenge to mainstream thinking. The rational person is but a sociohistorical construct. With modernity, not only has the

20 Note that Simmel’s theory involves a historicization of existentialism. Simmel sees the alienation that existentialists define as a primordial, fixed, and ahistorical condition of being as a basically historical phenomenon that emerged only with the development of modernity.

21 This interpretation is similar to that presented by Loiskandl, Weinstein, and Weinstein in their excellent introduction to Simmel’s Schopenhauer and Nietzsche (1986:xii–xvii).
structure of society changed, become more “rational”—such an argument has nothing new, and on it Weber is admittedly more convincing. According to Simmel, the inner constitution of the person him- or herself has tended to emphasize the rational over the nonrational. Parallel to the social transformation, both producing it and being produced by it, Simmel suggests, is a transformation of the self, whereas the multiplication of our individual attributes paradoxically inhibits our capacities for the unmediated expression of emotionality.

This theory stands in the same analytical relation to empirical reality as, for instance, Marx’s theory of alienation. In fact, the two theories present a similar definition of alienation. For Marx as for Simmel, alienation is an existential condition in which the unity between subject and object becomes an impossibility. Surely, Marx does not speak of “love” or something equivalent to it, but of creativity, stressing the unity and disunity between a person and an object rather than the connection between two people—which led Marx to develop a more limited concept of the authentic. But in terms of the conceptual definition of alienation, this difference is one of emphasis and scope, not of substance. The condition to which both authors refer is the same, and in both cases it is applied to the relation between persons as well as to the relation between a person and an object. Moreover, for both Marx and Simmel this existential condition is produced by some fundamental transformation of society—a transformation in the means of production for the former, a transformation in the forms of interaction that is only partially explained by economic factors for the latter.

That is a significant difference, and it accounts for the different analytical approaches of Marx and Simmel. Marx’s stress on the connection between person and object, and therefore on the process through which that connection is achieved—work—would set him and others (not just Engels) into an ever-expanding theoretical and methodological analysis of the structure, dynamics, and consequences of the productive processes under capitalism in its different phases. Simmel’s stress on interaction and on the growing intellectualization of the self, on the other hand, would lead us into an analysis of the processes and structures of mediation, of the dynamics taking place at the point of convergence between the intellectual and the nonrational. And indeed, it is as an examination of the circumstances attending the construction and channeling of emotions at different historical periods, of their changes and consequences, that Simmel’s understanding of the changing constitution of the person unfolds.

The approach involves an extension of the rationale applied in the discussion of “respect” to the effects of a network of mediators—as opposed to only one mediator. As “respect” is seen arising from the convergence of “love” and an intellectual construct—namely, a “general quality of worthiness”—the convergence of “love” and a cluster of cultural concepts can be presumed to produce a highly particularized emotional makeup. The number, content, and intensity of the emotions, the amount of mediated experience, the prospects of nonrational expression, the inner balance of the self all become a function of something that we can conceive as a culturally grounded intellectual grid—a net of mediators, specific to a place and time, through which “life” is channeled. Different grids bring about different structures of intersection between the intellect and the nonrational, produce different manifestations of emotionality, and, while still allowing for a significant amount of variance among individuals, beget different yet definite ways of being in the world.

22 Of course, this is not the only element that can be identified at the core of Marxian analysis. For an elaborated discussion of the core elements of Marxism, see Burawoy 1989.
23 For an analysis of how individuals construct personal accounts of love on the basis of cultural concepts, see Swidler, forthcoming.
Simmel, it is true, never spells out his approach in these terms. Although each is implicit in his work, neither the idea of a net of mediators nor the notion of a matrix on which the intellectual and the nonrational intersect is overtly stated. The fragmentary nature of his work, his preference for writing essays, and his almost complete disregard for systematization are well documented and can provide as many reasons for it. But it is clear that his approach hinges on these questions, and we can generate the sort of understanding that might justify taking the approach seriously from a study of these points.24

The nonrational per se would seem to remain beyond the bounds of analysis. This is perhaps inevitable, but not critical. We still have an approach in which rationality is perceived in terms of degree—the conceptual control of the emotions developing with capitalism and modernism, becoming increasingly ominous, yet never being fully complete.25 His pessimism notwithstanding, Simmel shared this view. He believed that we always retain a certain amount of nonrationality within ourselves. Except for our most formalized activities, we continue in our routines to act nonrationally to a degree. For Simmel, in fact, the modern person is not perfectly congruent with the rational, economic person, as most sociologists assume. According to him, the modern person attains the ideal of pure rationalism and intellectualism, if at all, only in specific structural settings, those intentionally constructed for the fulfillment of economic goals. On all other occasions, the nonrational and the intellectual merge to engender action that still retains a significant, though weakened, emotional component.

REFERENCES


24 I am by no means arguing that this is the only valuable element in Simmel’s sociology. Donald Levine’s work on Simmel’s microdynamics of interaction and the processes of social formation (1989b), Michael Kaern’s attempt to develop a Simmelian cognitive sociology (1985), David Frisby’s clarifications of Simmel’s theory of modernity (1981, 1984), and the by now classical studies of Theodore Caplow (1968) and Lewis Coser (1956) are just some examples attesting to the wealth of Simmel’s ideas.

25 And this is a point that nicely fits Arlie Hochschild’s theory of emotion management (1983) or some of Elias’s ideas on the civilizing of feeling (1978; see also Elias 1987). Like Simmel, indeed, these two authors present the idea of the conceptual control of emotions as a matter of degree, growing increasingly stronger with capitalism and modernism, yet never becoming absolute.


