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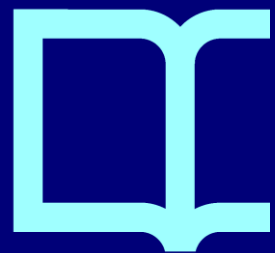
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Simmel in the Archive. On the Conflict of Late Modern Culture

Nàtalia Cantó-Milà, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), Barcelona

Abstract: This paper explores Georg Simmel's theorization on culture, viewed as a process instead of an accumulation of objects and institutions, and seeks to link Simmel's theory of culture, his diagnosis of the conflict of modern culture, with our current times, and with the role that archives can play in relation to our past, our future, and the always-growing objective culture.

Introduction

Against a conceptualization of culture that focuses solely upon the material and immaterial productions that human beings inherit and create in the course of time, be it making a distinction between high culture and popular culture, or using the more all-embracing anthropological approach, Simmel stated that culture could only be viewed and described as a vivid, living process. Culture is thus not a sample of objects, practices, traditions, beliefs, institutions and products, but the process of their creation, preservation as well as their renewed incorporation into the minds, practices and productions of concrete human beings. Culture is thus a process that takes place in each human being, in the course of each, always brief, life.

At the individual level, this process of culture finishes when the (mental) life of each concrete individual ends. However, viewed from the standpoint of society, culture is a process that does not end as long as interrelations among human beings and with their environment take place. From a social viewpoint, the process of culture is thus renewed by each new generation and within each individual. This process establishes an almost

impossible balance between each finite person, each generation, the objects we produce (understanding 'objects' in the widest possible sense), and our legacy.

Between the Individual and the Social. On the Objective and Subjective Cultures

Simmel's concept of culture points out a process which is, viewed from the standpoint of each individual, a process of 'cultivation.' (Simmel 1997:41-42) Cultivation in the sense that the process and the concept of culture are not to be seen as standing opposite to those of nature, but, in a way, as parts of it. It is 'natural' that human beings become 'cultivated' into something they can potentially be within their 'nature.' As Simmel said, you can 'cultivate' a wild pear tree to become an orchard tree, but you cannot 'cultivate' the same tree to become part of your home's furniture, or the mast of a ship. The process of culture for each individual mind is a case of the first type. It is a case of cultivation, not of transformation of that human mind into something different that was not there before.

Notwithstanding that a piece of furniture or the mast of a ship are also a part of culture, for they are products of human creative action: they are 'objective culture.' With this concept Simmel incorporated the socio-anthropological concept of culture into his conceptualization of culture. (Simmel 1997:42-43) Objective culture includes the spoons we use, the traditions we follow, and the institutions we create. Objective culture includes all those products of human creativity that have emerged from individual or collective production – objects, traditions, manners, conventions, works of art, ideas, beliefs – that people have created and, in the case they have been preserved (even if transformed), may survive the life of their creators, and hence become part of the lives of the generations to follow. This becomes possible because the products we create attain an independent existence from their creators immediately after they have been completed.

However, 'objective culture', as a concept, emerges when we fragment the process of culture into parts, thus focusing upon its necessary, yet not sufficient, phases. Opposite to this 'objective culture' we must identify 'subjective culture' as its counterpart, and, as Simmel dares to suggest, as the 'real' goal of culture. (Simmel 1997:45) Subjective culture is finite and can only be realized, fulfilled, within each individual person. Subjective culture implies the incorporation, assimilation, and embodiment of a few contents of objective culture into the minds and lives of concrete living individuals. These individuals enrich their lives by assimilating these contents (be them customs, be them artworks, be them rituals, be them laws), and thus the process of socialization implies, beyond the establishment of extremely important emotional bonds, also the process of incorporation of selected parts of objective culture into one's being and mind (and consequently into one's social relationships – out of which the very knowledge of the existence of the products of objective culture stems).

Furthermore each individual experience soon enough, absorbs more and more contents out of the always-growing objective culture, needing to produce contents itself: to exteriorize, to turn into objects one's innermost ideas, to discuss, to change, to create, and hence to contribute in a way to this always growing objective culture, which we have inherited, which we fill with life when it becomes part of our lives, and which we enrich for ourselves and for the generations to come.

The Tragedy of Culture

Even if Simmel viewed subjective culture as the final goal of the process of culture, subjective culture cannot exist, it cannot develop, without objective culture. It is its necessary counterpart, its necessary scale to its final destination, and its nourishment.

'Clearly there can be no subjective culture without an objective culture, because a subjective development or state constitutes culture only by virtue of its inclusion of such objects.' (Simmel 1997:45)

However, objective and subjective cultures neither evolve in parallel nor follow the same logic and speed of development and accumulation. While subjective culture cannot exist without objective culture, objective culture can become almost unrelated to subjective culture. As will be emphasised later, when we come to discuss the conflict of modern culture, especially under conditions of a highly developed division of labour, extremely developed and ‘perfected’ objects can be produced, without hardly any implication of their actual partial producers.

Objective culture (...) can, relatively speaking, become substantially (though not completely) independent of subjective culture, by the creation of ‘cultivated’ objects, i.e. ‘cultivating’ objects, as they should properly be understood, whose value as such is subjectively utilized only to an incomplete degree. Especially in highly developed epochs based on division of labour, the achievements of culture acquire the extent and coherence of a realm with its own kind of independent existence. Objects become perfect, more intellectual, they follow more and more obediently their own inner logic of material expediency. But *real culture, that is, subjective culture*, does not progress equally; indeed, it cannot in view of the vast expansion of the objective realm of things, divided up as it is between innumerable contributors.’ (Simmel 1997:45, my emphasis)

The process of culture viewed from the individual standpoint creates a circle that departs from the individual mind and returns enriched and changed at the end. The end station of the process is thus a mind, a person, who has become cultivated thanks to this process. This is why Simmel defined culture, from the subjective viewpoint, as the path of the soul (I shall use mind instead of soul) to itself. A transformative process that changes that very soul/mind, turning it (in an on-going process that stops with one’s death) into something it had the potential of becoming though had not yet become. In Simmel’s words:

‘In the midst of this dualism resides the idea of culture. It is based on an inner fact which can be expressed completely only allegorically and somewhat vaguely as the path of the soul to itself.’ (...) (C)ulture is the path from the closed unity through the developed diversity to the developed unity. Yet under all circumstances, this can only refer to a development toward a phenomenon which is laid out in the embryonic forces of the personality, sketched, as it were, as an ideal plan into the personality itself.’ (Simmel 1997: 56)

Thus Simmel views the individual mind as a 'closed unity' before the absorption of, and participation within, objective culture. Once individuals enter into the process and circle of culture, they incorporate into themselves the contents of objective culture (that which Simmel calls 'developed diversity' in the quote above), and thus the human mind becomes (and keeps on becoming until it stops existing) a 'developed unity' enriched through this on-going process of culture (and therefore cultivation).

Simmel highlights the fact that the two sides of the process of culture follow different logics of accumulation and expansion. On the one hand, on the subjective side, all contents of the objective culture that are incorporated into the subjective sphere, as well as all those that are being designed, created, conceived, before they become 'objects', stand in closest relation to the individual, to his or her pulsing life; they are a unity, not just a mere addition of more and more contents. They become part of the living person, who transforms them into something renewed, or give them form out of his or her life. On the other hand, the objects of culture, when they have been created, from the moment on they are finished and completed, or rather, when the process of production finishes and/or stops, they become external to their creators (a fact that does not only awake uncanny feelings, but also sometimes a great joy).¹ Once they become separated from their creators, these contents stand next to each other without any criteria, without any prioritisation, without any further logic than the logic of mere unknown and unreflecting co-existence. It becomes rather difficult for the individual to select and incorporate contents out of an always-growing objective culture.

The tragedy of culture, which Simmel writes about, resides in the fact that for each subject it is necessary to drink from the objective source and contribute to it in order to become subjectively richer. The subjective side is not enough in and of itself, one has to leave the sphere of the subjective in order to be able to come back to it.

'The concept of all culture is that the spirit creates something independent and objective, through which the development of the subject from itself to itself makes its way. But, in so doing, this integrating and culturally determining element is predestined to an autonomous development, which

¹ Who does not remember the feeling when reading one's own finished text?

still consumes the forces of human subjects, and still draws such subjects into its orbit, without elevating them to its own height: the development of the subjects now can no longer take the path followed by the objects; where the former follow it nonetheless, the development runs into a cul-de-sac or a vacuity of our innermost and most genuine life.' (Simmel 1997:72)

Subjective and objective cultures follow different paths of development, despite forming together the process and path of culture. While the subjective culture is clearly framed and limited by the life of each person, objective culture does not have the same kind of limits. It does not require any kind of assimilation, of digestion, of consumption, in order to keep on existing, and it does not require to be kept or maintained in any kind of order. One can pile book after book, painting after painting, building after building, map after map. And they do not need to be filled with life in order to remain. As long as they exist, objects are part of the always-growing objective culture. As long as there is society, as long as people live, the objective culture will keep on growing. And there are no limits, no rules to this growth, leading to an ever-growing gap between the growth of the subjective and the accumulation of more and more contents on the side of the objective culture.

'The development of culture externalizes the subject in an even more positive way through the already indicated formlessness and absence of boundaries which the objective spirit experiences from the numerical unrestrictedness of its producers. Everyone can contribute to the stock of objectivized cultural elements without any consideration of the other contributors. This stock may indeed possess certain nuances in individual cultural periods, and thus an internal qualitative limit, but no corresponding quantitative one. In fact, there is no reason not to expand indefinitely, not to line up book after book, work of art after work of art, discovery after discovery: the form of objectivity as such possesses an unlimited capacity for accomplishment. (Simmel 1997: 72-73)

This rhythm of accumulation on the side of the objective culture does not only follow a different logic than the path of growth and development of the subjective culture. It is, moreover, that the pace and formless form of accumulation of the objective culture makes the process of culture (the path of the mind to itself) increasingly difficult.

'Those objective artefacts which are the precipitate of a creative life and which are, in due course, absorbed by other people as a means of acquiring

culture, immediately begin to develop independently in accordance with the particular objective factors involved in their creation. Industries and sciences, arts and organizations impose their content and pace of development on individuals, regardless of or even contrary to the demands that these individuals ought to make for the sake of their own improvement, that is the acquisition of culture. The more finely wrought and perfect in their own way are those things which both have their basis in culture and are themselves the basis of culture, the more they follow an immanent logic which is by no means always appropriate to the process of individual development and selfrealization, which is the whole point of all the products of culture as such. (Simmel 1997:91)

Thus in a way the objective culture, which is a necessary step for the process of culture, for the enrichment of subjective culture is at the same time an impediment to the fulfilment of this very same process. Simmel parallels that which happens with objective culture with that which Marx had depicted as the ‘fetishism of merchandise,’ (Simmel 1997:70) for we are not able to see the traces of human producers behind the inhuman accumulation of more and more cultural productions, material and immaterial, which overwhelm us to the extent that we may not even know where to start, or even why to start. The cold, hieratic, always-growing line of products of the objective culture erases from our sight the pulsing life of their creators, their dreams, their stories... Through their estrangement and through their inassimilable quantity, objective culture feels cold and distant to the individual person, who may seem like an ant standing in front of a titan.

‘We know ourselves on the one hand as products of society: the physiological succession of ancestors, their adaptations and establishments, the traditions of their work, their knowledge and faith, the entire spirit of the past crystallized in objective forms—these determine the arrangements and content of our life so that the question could arise whether the individual is therefore simply anything other than a receptacle into which previously existing elements mix in various amounts; for if these elements are also ultimately produced by individuals, with the contribution of each one being an increasingly faint amount and the factors being produced only through their species-like and social convergence, in the synthesis of which the vaunted individuality would then again consist.’ (Simmel 2009:47–48)

All the same, only these ants can give meaning, sense and life to the growing titan. And only after drinking from and contributing to the growth of this titan, can each human grow in his or her subjective culture. This is the real tragedy of culture, according to

Simmel. And here is where I believe, and will later argue, that archives can play a fundamental role.

On Time and Culture

The tragedy of culture, which points at the totally different logics of existence of the subjective and objective cultures, is based upon the radically different relation to life, and therefore to time, of subjects and objects. It is a contrasted and tense relationship ‘between subjective life, that is restless but finite² in time, and its contents which, once created, are immovable but timelessly valid.’ (Simmel 1997:55) The temporality of human life and the timeless existence of the products of human creation implies furthermore and somehow paradoxically that ‘(w)hereas every inanimate thing only possesses simply the moment of the present, that which is alive extends in an incomparable way over the past and the future.’ (Simmel 1997:56)

This apparent paradox is, of course, not a paradox at all. The objects that constitute objective culture are not alive. This matter of course implies a relationship with time that is completely different to that of their creators. The relationship between time and the products of human creation is a relationship webbed strictly in the present tense, as Simmel argues in the quote above. There is nothing beyond the present. On the contrary, living subjects may have a much more limited time of existence, but each second of this existence has a shadow in the past and a projection towards the future. Furthermore, when contents of the always-growing and timeless objective culture are incorporated into people’s subjective culture, these objects regain an echo of life and temporality; they regain a history, a meaning, and become part of the subjects’ memories and experiences. These contents become to a certain extent ‘media’ through which we interrelate with previous as well as with future generations. We inherit a past full of stories, full of traditions, full of objects. This past does not gain meaning through the mere presence of its vestiges. It gains meaning through the stories told by others,

² ‘Infinite’ the English translation. (Simmel 1997:55) However, after contrasting with the German original, I have changed it to ‘finite’, which is the somehow inexact but nonetheless correct translation of ‘*zeitlich*.’

through shared moments, through their presence in our most quotidian or most special practices. They gain meaning through our experience. But we cannot experience (not even indirectly) the totality of objective culture. Our relationship to objective culture always implies a selection. A selection which we choose only to a very limited extent.

‘(A)n accentuation of the enigmatic relationship which prevails between the social life and its products on the one hand and the fragmentary life-contents of individuals on the other. The labour of countless generations is embedded in language and custom, political constitutions and religious doctrines, literature and technology as objectified spirit from which everyone can take as much of it as they wish to or are able to, but no single individual is able to exhaust it all. Between the amount of this treasure and what is taken from it, there exists the most diverse and fortuitous relationships. The insignificance or irrationality of the individual’s share leaves the substance and dignity of mankind’s ownership unaffected, just as any physical entity is independent of its being individually perceived. Just as the content and significance of a book remains indifferent to a large or small, understanding or unresponsive, group of readers, so any cultural product confronts its cultural audience, ready to be absorbed by anyone but in fact taken up only sporadically. This concentrated mental labour of a cultural community is related to the degree to which it comes alive in individuals just as the abundance of possibilities is related to the limitations of reality. In order to understand the mode of existence of such objective intellectual manifestations, we have to place them within the specific framework of our categories for interpreting the world. The discrepant relationship between objective and subjective culture, which forms our specific problem, will then find its proper place within these categories.’ (Simmel 1997:40)

When Simmel writes about objective culture, he emphasises its timelessness in comparison to the finitude of human life. I think the main point Simmel was trying to make is that, from the standpoint of each individual person, the process of culture is as long as a lifetime can be, while from a social viewpoint, the accumulation of all that each person of each generation has externalised and produced, and thus left behind, is a never ending process (as long as society holds) that enlarges more and more the realm of objective culture, a realm that only exists in the present tense. However, this does not mean that all products of human creation exist for a long time. The contrast with the finitude of human life highlights the very finitude of life itself instead of highlighting the immortality of those cultural products, which, of course, are immortal insofar as they cannot die. But they can break, disappear, become obsolete, or deteriorate. On many occasions, however, they can be kept, repaired, preserved, restored if this is so desired; maybe at an enormous economic cost, but they can be preserved in a way that

human life cannot, and they tend to be preserved, more so after modernity reached its first peak in the nineteenth century. We will now concentrate upon Simmel's analyses of the culture of his time (modern culture), and of our time (late modern culture).

The Conflict of (Late) Modern Culture

The tragedy of culture that has been presented above is a tragedy that Simmel viewed as present in all processes of cultural production and personal cultivation. However, he argued that modernity (his modernity – at the beginning of the twentieth century) had widened the gap between objective and subjective culture to an unprecedented stage.

‘To put it at its lowest, historical development tends increasingly to widen the gap between concrete creative cultural achievements and the level of individual culture. The disharmony of modern life, in particular the intensification of technology in every sphere combined with deep dissatisfaction with it, arises largely from the fact that things become more and more cultivated but people are capable only to a lesser degree of deriving from the improvement of objects an improvement of their subjective lives.’ (Simmel 1997:45)

The amount of, and perfection reached by, contents belonging to the objective culture had increased exponentially in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while the state of development of subjective culture had stagnated (if not gone backwards, Simmel 1997:38) Simmel would have asserted the existence of this gap even more emphatically if he had lived to see the twenty-first century. Moreover the modern conditions of production and consumption of those very perfected contents of objective culture make it increasingly difficult for the individual to relate to these objects as to a source of one's own personal development. On the one hand, and due to the highly developed division of labour, the producers disappear even more easily behind the product. On the other hand, mass consumption makes it difficult to see the product as made for one's use. In a way it becomes increasingly plausible to see ourselves as if we were made for a special type of product (a symbol of status, class, cultural or symbolic capital). Thus Simmel viewed people approaching objects of

objective culture for their technical perfection, for the perfection of their realisation, for their social meaning, in terms of lifestyle or status, rather than for that which they could offer to their personal development.

The combination of these factors makes, according to Simmel, the closure of the circle, of the path of the soul/mind back on itself hardly possible, and the development of subjective culture subsequently extremely difficult, while the speed of accumulation and the quality of the accumulated objects on the side of the objective culture keeps on increasing. While objective culture accelerates, subjective culture stagnates.

The tremendous expansion of objective, available material of knowledge allows or even enforces the use of expressions that pass from hand to hand like sealed containers without the condensed content of thought actually enclosed within them being unfolded for the individual user. Just as our everyday life is surrounded more and more by objects of which we cannot conceive how much intellectual effort is expended in their production, so our mental and social communication is filled with symbolic terms, in which a comprehensive intellectuality is accumulated, but of which the individual mind need make only minimal use. The preponderance of objective over subjective culture that developed during the nineteenth century is reflected partly in the fact that the eighteenth century pedagogic ideal was focused upon the formation of man, that is upon a personal internal value, which was replaced during the nineteenth century, however, by the concept of 'education' in the sense of a body of objective knowledge and behavioural patterns. This discrepancy seems to widen steadily. Every day and from all sides, the wealth of objective culture increases, but the individual mind can enrich the forms and contents of its own development only by distancing itself still further from that culture and developing its own at a much slower pace. (Simmel 2007:453–454)³

Moreover, in order to make individual life more bearable under the conditions of a highly developed objective (objectified) culture, which implies an always-growing chain of means in order to reach final ends (and Simmel thought the development of subjective culture to be one of them), the means that we often encounter on the way (be them money, be them technology) tend to become ends. Simmel argued that we become distracted, caught by the 'fetishism of the object' (if I may paraphrase Marx as well), and thus lose in the tangent the path to fulfil the process of culture depicted above. The gap between objective and subjective culture grows, and the consequences of this gap

³ Compare with Simmel 1997:39.

change our understanding of ourselves, of our social relationships, and our way of living.

‘(B)y way of the intellectual achievements of the species, the products of its history: knowledge, lifestyles, art, the state, a man's profession and experience of life these constitute the path of culture by which the subjective spirit returns to itself in a higher, improved state. Therefore all behaviour intended to increase our culture is bound up with the form of means and ends. This behaviour is, however, fragmented into countless separate activities. Life is made up of modes of action which, only to a very limited extent, have, or can be seen to have, any common direction. The resulting tendency towards fragmentariness and uncertainty of purpose 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. The resulting immensity of the series of ends and means gives rise to a phenomenon of incalculably far-reaching consequences: certain members of these series become, in our consciousness, ends in themselves. (...) The vast intensive and extensive growth of our technology which is much more than just material technology entangles us in a web of means, and means towards means, more and more intermediate stages, causing us to lose sight of our real ultimate ends. *This is the extreme inner danger which threatens all highly developed cultures, that is to say, all eras in which the whole of life is overlaid with a maximum of multi-stratified means. To treat some means as ends may make this situation psychologically tolerable, but it actually makes life increasingly futile.*’ (Simmel 1997:91, my emphasis)

Life is increasingly futile, judges Simmel, when we lose our path back to ourselves, and get caught in the unselfconscious tricks of modernity: the all-levelling effects of money, breaking us free from personal ties but not bringing freedom to something concrete and desired, or the use of the most perfected technology without really knowing what to use it for (since individual culture has not grown at the same pace).⁴ Our objective culture is overwhelming, huge, highly elaborated. We stand there, as ants even smaller than generations before us, in front of an unprecedentedly enormous titan. Without knowing where to start, without knowing what to do, beyond attempting to objectify ourselves in order to be part of the valuable world, the world of the objective (objectified) culture, the world of tangible values.⁵ Alone, small, and surrounded by an economy that only

⁴ A point which Simmel made in *The Philosophy of Money* (2007).

⁵ The link between Simmel's theory of culture and theory of value has very rarely been worked upon. See the epilogue of Cantó-Milà 2005 for an attempt at establishing this highly interesting link.

values what we produce, and a history that locates us where we are, and writes itself quicker than we can read.

On History and Memory

The relationship between objective and subjective culture regarding time could be parallelised with Nora's reflections upon the relationship between history and memory in *Lieux de Mémoire*: those very special places in which memory crystallises (Nora 1989), but only in part as it disappears from the rest of our lives. History accelerates, historical knowledge grows, reflection upon historical reflection emerges... but memory vanishes away from our everyday life, those lived stories that do not settle, that are continuously shaped and reshaped by waves of remembrance and oblivion, like water and sand drawing the line between the coast and the ocean, become petrified; they become objectified culture.

The "acceleration of history," then, confronts us with the brutal realization of the difference between real memory-social and unviolated, exemplified in but also retained as the secret of so-called primitive or archaic societies-and history, which is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past. On the one hand, we find an integrated, dictatorial memory-unself-conscious, commanding, all-powerful, spontaneously actualizing, a memory without a past that ceaselessly reinvents tradition, linking the history of its ancestors to the undifferentiated time of heroes, origins, and myth and on the other hand, our memory, nothing more in fact than sifted and sorted historical traces. The gulf between the two has deepened in modern times with the growing belief in a right, a capacity, and even a duty to change. Today, this distance has been stretched to its convulsive limit. (Nora 1989:8)

In this way, Nora sets in parallel, probably unknowingly, history and memory with the wider processes followed by the objective and subjective cultures as Simmel depicted them.

'Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long

dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic-responsive to each avenue of conveyance or phenomenal screen, to every censorship or projection. History, because it is an intellectual and secular production, calls for analysis and criticism. Memory installs remembrance within the sacred; history, always prosaic, releases it again.' (Nora 1989:8-9)

In this fragment Nora paradigmatically depicts the objectification of the subjective in the realm of history and memory. And when it comes to memory, and the sites of memory, as those very special places in which memory is kept (but also in which it is crystallised, objectified, and becomes history), archives come immediately to mind as one of the most (if not the most) important sites of memory.

Bringing It All to the Archive

What is the role of the archive in late modernity? In a time in which the objectification of culture has advanced technologically to such an extent that we can keep all our data in a format that does not require much more than a few computers. Just think about the amount of data, of books, of articles, of text that we can carry in our handbags! It had never been so easy to carry data with us, so much data that we shall not be able to assimilate it all within a lifetime... and it all fits within a portable computer or a tablet. We can write our texts, rewrite them, correct them, copy them at a speed, which Simmel could not have guessed. Moreover we can film just about anything, record anything, store it, replay it. Any fleeting moment can thus become an object, become captured by a camera of any mobile device, briefly depicted and tweeted; we can comment on anything and share it, imprint on everything that surrounds us. Objectify and share before the necessary time for reflection (which is not the same for everyone and for every matter) has filtered that which really matters to us, and deserves our attention, from the tremendous noise that surrounds us. We objectify our thoughts, our views, our feelings, at an always-increasing speed. And we have the tools to do so. Tools Simmel would not have dared guessing. Tools that are supposed to permit us to develop and grow as human beings, stay in touch, tell our friends (or so the

advertisements tell us)... but which perhaps have helped us to set a pace for ourselves, which we cannot keep up with. The gap between objective and subjective culture grows further.

At the same time, data is becoming extremely vulnerable – a software becoming obsolete, a virus, an unexpected mistake, and we can lose it all. Preservation is at stake more than ever... but just as much as the question... what should we be preserving? Lost within the multitude of contents of objective culture, we lack the criteria to distil the important from the banal. However, we are given the wonderful opportunity to keep, to freeze within the castle of objective culture named archive for the generations to come that which has been crystallised and given to the realm of objective culture by a great variety of people, viewing the world from contrasted, sometimes even contradictory, viewpoints.

Simmel diagnosed (let me emphasise again: without being able to guess the advances that the objective culture would make in the century that separates us from his writings) the following:

‘(T)his inorganic accumulative capacity, as it were, makes it profoundly incommensurable with the form of personal life. For the latter’s absorptive capacity is not only limited by strength and longevity, but also by a certain unity and relative closure of its forms, and it therefore makes a selection with a determined scope from among the elements offered to it as means of individual development. Now it would seem that this incommensurability need not become a practical problem for the individual because it leaves aside what his or her personal development cannot assimilate. However, this is not so easily done. The infinitely growing stock of the objectified mind makes demands on the subject, arouses faint aspirations in it, strikes it with feelings of its own insufficiency and helplessness, entwines it into total constellations from which it cannot escape as a whole without mastering its individual elements. There thus emerges the typical problematic condition of modern humanity: the feeling of being surrounded by an immense number of cultural elements, which are not meaningless, but not profoundly meaningful to the individual either; elements which have a certain crushing quality as a mass, because an individual cannot inwardly assimilate every individual thing, but cannot simply reject it either, since it belongs potentially, as it were, to the sphere of his or her cultural development. One could characterize this with the exact reversal off that saying, ‘*Nihil habentes, omni possidentes*,’ which characterized the blissful poverty of the early Franciscans in their absolute liberation from all things that would somehow still tend to divert the soul from its path through themselves and thereby

make it an indirect route. Instead of that, human beings in very rich and overburdened cultures are '*omnia habientes, nihil possidentes.*' (Simmel 1997:73)

I believe that, if we agree with Simmel's diagnosis, or, moreover, if we agree with the thesis that the tendencies, which he already acknowledged, have not but increased in the last hundred years, this is something we should take very seriously into account when we consider the role that archives play in our society, and even more seriously if we wonder which role we think that they should play in our contemporary society.

Simmel did not write directly about archives. He did not write much about any kind of institutional setting that takes care of our legacy regarding objective culture. The closest he came to this topic is captured in his brief essay on 'The Berlin Trade Exhibition', in which he discussed the effects on the individual mind of an immense accumulation of wonderful and interesting objects and artefacts to be viewed, admired and considered one after the other – and this within the briefest period of time (the exhibition visit). Thus he asserted:

'(I)t appears as though modern man's one-sided and monotonous role in the division of labour will be compensated for by consumption and enjoyment through the growing pressure of heterogeneous impressions, and the ever faster and more colourful change of excitements. The differentiation of the active side of life is apparently complemented through the extensive diversity of its passive and receiving side. The press of contradictions, the many stimuli and the diversity of consumption and enjoyment are the ways in which the human soul that otherwise is an impatient flux of forces and denied a complete development by the differentiations within modern work seeks to come alive. No part of modern life reveals this need as sharply as the large exhibition. Nowhere else is such a richness of different impressions brought together so that overall there seems to be an outward unity, whereas underneath a vigorous interaction produces mutual contrasts, intensification and lack of relatedness.' (Simmel 1997:256)

Under our contemporary conditions archives have a crucial role to play. And I would dare to assert that they should contribute to the possibility of experiencing this 'unity' Simmel mentioned in the last quote, yet not in the same way as the trade exhibition depicted by Simmel.

Archives are indeed crucial institutions for the preservation of objective culture. It is therefore necessary to justify why I suggest that they should in a way provide us with this ‘unity,’ which objective culture can certainly not provide us with. Only subjective culture can close the circle. So how could archives contribute to this impossible endeavour?

Archives are institutions that preserve a good part of that which we have inherited from the past as well as keep for future generations; they are our witnesses of the passing of time. Thanks to the work of many silent archivists we have been able to rescue forgotten stories, and listen to the voices of those who are not with us anymore. We do not need to look too far away in order to find a wonderful example of the incredible work done by archivists. Without them, the two volumes of Simmel’s collected works, which have given us access to Simmel’s letters, would not exist. (Simmel 2008a, 2008b) They would have been lost forever. However, finding many of those letters was extremely difficult. Only the work of many years spent in different archives made it possible to find those many letters, still knowing of many others that have been lost forever, and knowing that there may be others, which we have never known about.

The task of preservation is extremely difficult, especially when we do not do it for ourselves, when we are preserving for the future as well. How can we know what will matter to *them*, when *they* have not been born yet? How can we read the witnesses of a past, which will always remain a ‘foreign country’, (Lowenthal 1999) and understand their voices?

We know that the only way we can actually look into the future and understand the past is from our actual standpoint, from our time and place, from our subjective culture. We can only incorporate contents stemming from the well of objective culture, when we turn them into our own, into part of us – we incorporate them, even if we try to be as faithful as possible to the original will, intentions, time and context of their original authors. Incorporation always implies a previous selection, and an interpretation. And a selection and an interpretation are also implied when we choose what to preserve for the future. Only when selections take place haphazardly, thus preserving and destroying at

random, we miss the human made selection (be it conscious, be it not fully conscious), which is based upon values. (Simmel 2007:56–76)

As archivists we may think that we only try to keep the voices of others, but when we engage in an archive, we do more than that. We can only keep them from our own standpoint. And this very standpoint makes, in my opinion, the archive richer. It makes it furthermore more accessible, and more open to those who may approach it. It makes it also more open to the variety of voices that may find their place within the archive. For knowing where we stand may be a step towards acknowledging and including other perspectives and standpoints – as many as possible. By stating our own voice, our own criteria of selection, or way of seeing the task we attempt to fulfil, we fill the archive with renewed life; a life that renovates its contents, and makes them more accessible to those who look for them. It is not that we should turn the voices of those who we try to keep alive in our archives into our own. It is rather that by stating why we are preserving what we are preserving and how we are preserving it, we make the archive more alive. It stops being solely a mere accumulation of contents of that always-growing objective culture, and becomes one single product of human creation. Indeed objectified, as it could not be otherwise, but at least one unity. And this is what the urban dwellers sought for in the Berlin Trade Exhibition, if we believe Simmel's words.

We cannot archive experience. Experience is not directly objectifiable, but we can archive our own voice, the voice of those who have made the selection, so that generations to come know what we chose to forget, what we chose to remember, and what we remembered or forgot without being (fully) conscious of it.

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