

# Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life"

Summary of Simmel's primary claims:

1. The intellect preserves one's **subjective** life in the metropolis and functions as a kind of defense mechanism.
2. In an urban market economy, intellect and money are mutually reinforcing. (Cf. instrumental rationality, anonymity, exchange, interchangeability of parts.)
3. Calculated and coordinated time schedules add yet another element to the **rationalization** and **objectification** of human relations in the city.
4. Overstimulation combined with an active intellect produce the **blasé** attitude typical of the urban dweller. Thus, another aspect of the leveling of value occurs. (cf. nihilism)
5. The sheer number of people in a large city and their anonymity make one, of necessity, more reserved. **Reserve** is the outer aspect of one's **inner indifference** and **aversion** to others. This results in a heightened sense of **individuality** and freedom from group demands.
6. The city and the individual ultimately achieve a kind of autonomy of growth, complexity, and influence over economic, personal, and intellectual relations. (Simmel's vitalism emerges here.) "Man does not end with the limits of his body or the area comprising his immediate activity. Rather is the range of the person constituted by the sum of effects emanating from him temporally and spatially. In the same way, a city consists of its total effects which extend beyond its immediate confines." Individual style is the mark of a personality not imposed by others.
7. Increasing **specialization** of behavior and needs tend to limit individual self-expression (subjective culture) and the ability to differentiate oneself from others. Thus, a tension arises between the will toward, and the drowning of, individuality.

## Commentary

Specialization in contemporary trans-urban societies leads to many forms of fragmentation. Cultural forms embodied in texts, images, sounds, etc. are so large in number and so diverse that one is easily overwhelmed and forced to confront a kind of informational **sublime**. The production and range of existing information exceeds our capacity to even imagine it. Thus, we find ways of filtering the information to suit our needs and individual forms of life. We seek information on subjects that appeal to us, with which we identify, and that link us to other groups whose "objective culture" (in Simmel's terms) we then assimilate and make our own.

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