Im@go
A Journal of the Social Imaginary

Simmel's Hidden King - and Ours

John A. Y. Andrews

Abstract

Georg Simmel's "hidden king" metaphor for the leading idea of an historic age evokes narrative associations that reach deep to depict the intrinsic dynamics and tensions in human activity that arise for Simmel from the basic contradiction between life as continuous flow vs. the resistant forms life creates and through which alone it can express itself. This paper first elaborates these narrative associations, then uses them to explore the key problem of Simmel's essay—the unique antipathy to form per se that Simmel saw as characteristic of modernity—and finally offers some suggestions as to how his metaphor may or may not serve to address features of our current order, a century on.

Keywords

Simmel, Georg | Hidden King | Lebensphilosophie | Modernity | Social Imaginary

Author

John A. Y. Andrews – jaya@aya.yale.edu

Number 10 – Year VI /December 2017 pp. 5-20

DOI: 10.7413/22818138096

ISSN: 2281-8138

www.imagojournal.it

Simmel's passing metaphor identifying the leading idea of an historic age as a "hidden king" (Simmel, 1918a, p. 11) brings with it narrative and imaginary associations that vividly demonstrate the intrinsic human tensions—operative at the three levels of personality, society and culture, and recurrent across the specific realms ("worlds") of human activity and experience (economic activity, aesthetics, religion, etc.)—that in the most general (and pervasive) Simmelian framing boil down to a basic contradiction between life as a continuous flow of activity on the one hand, and on the other, the resistant forms life creates and through which alone it can express itself. This fundamental contradiction between life as flow and life as form permeates, animates, and propels the dialectics of Simmel's philosophical project from his *Philosophie des Geldes* (Simmel, 1900) right through to his final works, such as *Lebensanschauung* (Simmel, 1918b) and the present essay, Der Konflikt der modernen Kultur (Simmel, 1918a). It is a contradiction played out in both in micro and macro framings, distilled into particular flavors and concentrations in different historical settings and periods.

Not every historical theme—nor every instance of the life-as-flow/life-as-form dichotomy—is a leading idea describable as a "hidden king," however. What distinguishes the latter is the confluence of the trenchancy of its depiction of reality on the one hand with the imperative of its value demands on the other. This vital conjunction of Is and Ought is what makes such an idea or theme a "hidden king." (It is important to note here that in Simmel's view, value demands include a much broader range of elements than ethical norms per se, e.g.: aesthetic evaluations, customs and manners, etc.).

With respect to his own time, Simmel believes he has found not merely a particular instance of such a leading idea or hidden king, but indeed a uniquely troubling one that, though it may illuminate and explain many of the concerns of modernity, can no longer resolve them. Earlier ages were characterized by the emergence of leading—as well as problematic—ideas such as *being* (classical Greece), *God* (Medieval Europe), *nature* (Renaissance), *natural law* (17th century), *ego* (into the 19th century). For modernity, Simmel identified the concept of *life* as predominant, yet the problem for him was that life's opponent was not a relatively specific set of cultural products and arrangements as had been true for earlier ages (superstition, paganism, etc.), but rather *form per se*—life's own creation. In his essay, he traces examples of this attack on form per se in art (Expressionism); philosophy (Pragmatism); personal and sexual ethics (the new morality); and religion (religiosity without belief). *Life's* aim, in Simmel's view, is to overcome *form,* yet the two are intrinsically interdependent adversaries—*life* can get rid of or outgrow certain *forms,* but not *form* itself.

To unpack the resonances of Simmel's metaphor a bit more, we begin by examining some of the features of kingship, and more particularly hidden kingship, in a narrative

frame. We then pose several key questions of Simmel's formulation of *life* as a hidden king (and a uniquely modern one at that.) Finally, we consider his position from the point of view of our current situation, and in particular, the role of narrative frames in an era overwhelmed by information.

In the narratives of Western imaginary (setting aside post-Enlightenment republican biases for the moment), kingship *per se* is typically depicted in positive terms. A "good" king is so styled because he embodies the kingly virtues that characterize and legitimize proper kingly authority (such as wisdom, strength, decisiveness, compassion, fairness). By contrast, a "bad" king is either deficient in these virtues or rejects them: he is a bad king not because kingship is bad, but because he is bad at being a king.

A king's authority integrates both traditional and sacred or charismatic elements—a timeless continuity in the succession ("The king is dead, long live the king!"), coupled with the unique character and exclusive incumbency of a particular individual within the spatial and temporal bounds of his eponymous "reign." In metaphorical analogue, the leading ideas Simmel is talking about have this double character as well. They are deeply embedded in an ongoing conversation—our deepest musings (in the Western tradition) about the world continue to carry the imprint of categories, dichotomies and dilemmas at least as old as the Greeks' first efforts to organize religion into philosophy: body and soul, sense and intuition, the actual and the ideal, the individual and the collective, form and content, and so on. Form is dead, long live form! (We will return to this thought later.) On the other hand, it is also true that distinctive constellations and recombinations of these elements have come to dominate and characterize specific historical periods, rather like individual reigns: the Age of Reason, the Age of Enlightenment, the Romantic Era, etc. The puissance of each such idea rests initially both in its uniquely intriguing freshness and in its ability to convincingly—indeed, compellingly—reorganize our understanding of the past and present. However, not all such organizing ideas are "hidden kings"—the latter not only reorganize our sense of what is, but are also compelling in their demands for what ought to be. Hidden kings, then, not only have a dual relationship to time (timelessness/timeliness), but they also characteristically realign the quotidian traffic between our understandings of Is and Ought. Simmel delineates a number of these: *being* (classical Greece), *God* (Medieval Europe), *nature* (Renaissance), *natural law* (17th century), *ego* (into the 19th century).[1] The rise of Christianity, for example, sharply recalibrated the relationship of human and

[1] Simmel's sketch here is, of course, hardly unique in periodizing the history of ideas—such attempts neither began with Hegel nor ended with Foucault. Key to Simmel's point here is not the specific sequence of these historical periods, nor their characteristic forms, but that the modern period is unique in its characteristic antipathy to form itself.

divine—as God, the divine became at once more utterly transcendent, and his incarnation correspondingly much more radical, in contrast to the apotheoses of the Greco-Roman pantheon. Later, with the Renaissance, man stepped up from a minor supporting role in the salvation-drama into the lead role on nature's center stage (man as the measure of all things.) By the middle of the 18th century, Deus was generally confined to the machine of natural law, and Reason had thoroughly displaced virtù as the age's ethical touchstone, as one era gave way to the next.

To understand the distinctive power of these "hidden kings" it is worth exploring further the manner in which the hidden king's hiddenness suggests further narrative associations. In particular, "hidden king" narratives characteristically include:

- An unstable, even dangerous disjunction in the present moment between what is and what ought to be (why else would the rightful king be hidden, if not for safety in the face of a present regime of usurpation);
- faithful followers who are, or come to be, aware and protective of his secret;
- a partially remembered past that bestows legitimacy on the hidden king;
- an anticipated moment of revelation, often accompanied by climactic conflict and the settling of accounts with his opponents; and
- ultimate resolution of disorder through either a general restoration of former arrangements (for older hidden kings like Odysseus) or establishment of a new golden age (for hidden boy-kings like Arthur).

Taken together, these associations around hiddenness point to a more nuanced view of how these leading ideas actually operate in historical context. Let's take these points in turn.

1. Present Is/Ought

The hidden king does not actually rule in present time, but by his very existence he creates a normative alternative to current arrangements as an evocation of a remembered (or reconstructed) past and a compelling value-centered call to an envisioned future. Even where it does not dominate, the existence of such a normative alternative is itself influential, creating a sense of possibility that in itself changes the relationships between ruler and ruled. In his chapter on Secrecy in *Soziologie* (1908), Simmel notes that:

> The secret offers, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest world; and the latter is decisively influenced by the former.
>
> Whether there is secrecy between two individuals or groups, and if so how much, is a question that characterizes every relation between them. For even where one of the two does not notice the existence of a secret, the behavior of the concealer, and hence the whole relationship, is certainly modified by it. (Simmel, 1950, p. 330).

But the dialectical tensions of Is/Ought in hidden kingship run in multiple directions: first, there is an outward tension between the alternative of the hidden king and the temporal present to which he represents an opposed alternative. This outward tension is reflected in changed relationships among cohabitants of the same social space, and among the key cultural elements that form the context in which the hidden king exists. Even in the absence of outward disclosure, the attitude and behavior of the subversive are intrinsically different from those of the submissive, for the subversive harbors not only the desire to act, but also some measure of confidence in the possibility and efficaciousness of action, even where he takes no action at a given time. However subtly, this confidence can in turn disturb the serenity of the status quo, creating a measure of unease in the current authorities (which, if the subversive can successfully deflect it elsewhere, in turn increases his own sense of confidence.)

Second, there is inward, subjective tension in the very notion of *hidden* kingship, for after all, what is kingship if it does not evince some kind of manifest glory and majesty?—And if this is so, how does one reconcile this with its hiddenness? In other words, there is for the hidden king himself a persistent dilemma of when and to whom to reveal his majesty, and a sense of inherent instability in enacting an internally self-contradictory social type. Even if "my kingdom is not of this world," to what world does it then belong, and how does the language of that world translate into action in this? What are the common threads that link them? For the king and his followers there is, in short, a more or less intense dissonance between one's own present circumstances as they are—encompassing concealment and greater or lesser privation, etc.—and the way things ought to be: manifest and majestic. This dissonance has a temporal dimension as well: while in objective terms the two states of concealment and manifest majesty may succeed one another, in a subjective sense both co-occur for king and followers—for these, it is not that this ordinary person *will become* king in the future: in fact, he already *is*, and it is only those outside the secret circle of cognoscenti (essentially, everyone else) who do not recognize this. Similarly, in the realm of ideas, the suggestion or hint of a variant principle for organizing our construction of reality and value draws forth both strong reaction and a sense among its adherents of living into a new regime that has already begun.

2. Followers

A king must have subjects, and a hidden king requires and acquires adherents who, though perhaps disadvantaged by their deference to him in present time, nonetheless sustain an expectation of future reward or at least participation in the kingdom to come. They may often be among those who are marginalized in the current order and who anticipate the reversal of social hierarchy, or they may be members of disaffected elite groups, looking for a way to resume their elite status on newly renegotiated terms—Robin Hood in his relation to King Richard, for example.

Since hierarchies are in flux in such insurgent movements, contention can often arise over the negotiation of eventual winners and losers—will it be those most fervently connected with and dedicated to the radical message, or those of the Talleyrand variety, who are more adept at navigating and negotiating an accommodation with the old order? By analogy with Simmel's focus on the emergence of *life* as the hidden king leading into his era, would it be a Spencerian Social Darwinism that came to the fore in service to the notion of life? Schopenhauer's stoic pessimism or Nietzsche's jubilant egoism and self-expression? American Pragmatism that made truth subservient to and derivative from life? Bergson's or Simmel's own Lebensphilosphie? And certainly, too, it occurred to Simmel to wonder what sort of philosophy of life could realistically emerge atop the mass carnage of the World War.

The point of greatest importance here is that the kingship of hidden kings is negotiated in a social space rife with internal and external conflicts, divided loyalties, and divergent methods of appropriating cultural and historical precedents in the enactment of a new regime to come. In a sense, this is part of Simmel's answer to the deterministic side of Marx in *Das Kapital* and elsewhere—history is dialectical, but its specifics are neither predetermined nor inevitable.

3. History

Yet history is at the core of the hidden king's kingship. Without a firm grounding in an at least recognizable, albeit reconstructed past, we have no basis with which to come to terms with claims for legitimacy from a newly emergent social movement, or a new inflection in the history of ideas. Even the formlessness of which Simmel complains in 1918 has a continuity with a formed past, even if in the form of past iconoclastic movements. Without a linguistic/cultural connection to the past, how is legitimation to be achieved? The oratory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., became an especially stunning example of historical legitimation for Americans in particular, in that it boldly laid

claim to reconstruct the themes of exodus and freedom from the familiar and foundational documents of both Christianity and the American republic.

Like King's oratory, the proclamation of a hidden kingship is itself the reconstruction and recombination of inherited cultural and historical themes. Consider in particular the gospel accounts of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as a form of performance art: the appropriation and redeployment of Hebrew prophecy (itself frequently characterized by performance art of its own), the mimicry of and counterpoise to the Roman triumphs, and the evocation of King David in David's own capital city. And yet, it is history reimagined, as Christians—with the invocation: "…so that the scripture might be fulfilled…"—appropriated and rather shamelessly reglossed the Hebrew prophetic writings to legitimize a very different sort of king.

One might well argue that the construction of our imaginary *necessarily* demands our misreading and even bowdlerization of that which comes before. There is more than a little literature on the misreadings and misappropriation of Simmel's own work—Elizabeth Goodstein's recent book, *Georg Simmel and the Disciplinary Imaginary* (Goodstein, 2017), presents a particularly careful and accomplished examination of these, and of the impossibility of fully recovering an "authentic" understanding of Simmel's own perspective from the point preceding the disciplinary imaginary subsequently built upon the bones of such misreadings.

It is also true that much of this historical reconstruction and legitimation appears to occur during a later phase of consolidation after the claim of kingship is first overtly made. Though no doubt reliant on earlier oral traditions, the gospels, after all, were written a full generation after the events they describe, and long after the tonally very different letters of Paul to the churches. The earlier, latent phases of hidden kingship, rather, appear to be marked more by an appreciation for the charismatic freshness and novelty of the message, rather than its continuity with the past.

4. Epiphany/disclosure and decisive conflict

Naturally, proclamation of a hidden king hardly goes unchallenged—existing powers have much at stake in snuffing out the normative and practical challenge posed by a hidden king. In the history of ideas, few proclamations are more striking in retrospect than Martin Luther's nailing his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg and his subsequent showdown with Johannes Eck at the Diet of Worms, asserting the supremacy of conscience over established authority ("Hier stehe ich, ich kann nicht anders")—yet it would be 130 years of increasingly bloody conflict to establish even the ruler's right to exercise his conscience on his own and his subjects' behalf in Germany,

after the opposing parties had confused, battled and slaughtered each other into exhaustion. Conflict may have its decisive inflection points, but can in reality be lengthy, messy, and far less than conclusive.

5. Resolution as restoration or as new order

The denouement of a hidden king narrative consists in the realignment of Is and Ought—but this can occur either as the restoration of an older propriety, as in the case of Odysseus' return to Ithaca, or in the initiation of a new golden age, as with Arthur—though each of these outcomes can also contain aspects of the other. While the narrative frame ends here, the life process continues into new and different frames.

* * *

These resonances in the narrative form of the "hidden king" give additional shape to Simmel's metaphor for the leading ideas that come to summarize and ethically compel the fundamental values and character of an historic age.

We may ask several questions of Simmel's argument:

1) Was his concern with the self-proclaimed antipathy to *form per se* in his days overstated?

Simmel certainly believed that the emergence of *life* as the hidden king of his era also brought with it an unprecedented level of conflict—in fact, "the conflict of modern culture"—between life as flow and life in the forms it creates through which alone that flow can express itself. The succession of previous cultural eras, he believed, had brought with it the forcible displacement of particular *Leitbegriffe*—and their particular associated cultural forms—by their successors: God replaced by Nature, Nature by Natural Law, Natural Law by Reason, and so on. Yet never before, he believed, had the ongoing flow of life visibly attacked form as form—this, he argued, was a feature unique to modernity, making it decisively, qualitatively, and even categorically different from any preceding age and any prior succession by a "hidden king." It is as though he wanted *his* hidden king—the hidden king of life - to have the unique distinction of having become a republican.

This sense that modernity poses challenges different not merely in degree but in kind from those of past eras is of a piece with what Goodstein has captured and catalogued in rigorous detail as Simmel's coherent project, from *Philosophie des Geldes* in 1900 through his last works in 1918—including *Lebensanschauung* and the current

essay—to create a philosophy of modernity following the collapse of German Idealism in the late 19th century:

> The case of Georg Simmel underlines how epistemological questions concerning the status of social scientific concepts and methods are linked to historiographical concerns of both a general and a specific, institutional or disciplinary, nature. Simmel's significance as a cultural and social theorist comprises both his philosophical achievements and a considerable, yet largely unrecognized, impact on his students and readers. His innovative approaches to cultural interpretation brought the legacy of the German philosophical tradition into conversation with the phenomena of everyday modern life, and the influence of his ideas and modernist style of philosophizing extends through figures as diverse as Walter Benjamin, Martin Buber, György Lukács, Robert Musil, and Robert Park.
>
> But this very diversity—or put in another way, the absence of a "school" or doctrine of any sort—has helped to render Simmel's intellectual influence virtually invisible. To write his conceptual and methodological innovations into the history of twentieth-century thought therefore requires not just an encounter with his writings but also an interrogation of the nature of his influence and of the reasons it has gone unrecognized. And it entails taking seriously Simmel's insistence, expressed as early as 1899, that despite his reputation abroad, he was not, in fact, a sociologist: "I am a philosopher, see my life's vocation in philosophy, and only pursue sociology as a sideline." (Goodstein, 2017, p. 2)

But from a somewhat different perspective, we must ask whether Simmel is correct in his claim for the categorical uniqueness of the modern era vis-a-vis its predecessors—in fact, we may fairly suggest that he wants it both ways: his argument insists that the movement to modernity with *life* as its *Leitbegriff* is both a uniquely different transition (in its frontal assault on form qua form), but also that it continues the general overall pattern of life-as-flow in opposition to the forms it has created as the sole and necessary means of its self-expression. A historical case might be made that, while the pace of transformation may indeed be faster in modernity, the magnitude of the attack on form in Simmel's day was (in relative terms) no greater a departure from its immediate predecessor than was the Renaissance displacement of God by man as the measure of all things, for example.

For us, the question arises from a different direction: if the transition to modernity was qualitatively unique in its attack on form per se, what does that imply about the period since Simmel's essay? Did history end with the transition to modernity? Has the paradigm of succeeding *Leitbegriffe* come to a screeching halt, or have there been/will there be further transitions—characterized how? Our second question, then, must be:

2) Given Simmel's view of the human cultural development as a continuing set of tensions between life as flow and life as form, More-Life/More-Than-Life, Is/Ought, Reality/Value, etc., where do his concerns stand now with respect to transitions and events subsequent to his essay?

As Goodstein points out, it is not ever possible to revisit fully or adequately the *Problemstellung* of a thinker as influential (and misappropriated) as Simmel once that *Problemstellung* has been metabolized (or cannibalized, or ignored) in the development of a subsequent, operative (in this case, disciplinary) imaginary. Nonetheless, it is a fair question to ask whether the attack on form per se that Simmel identified a hundred years ago has persisted, intensified, subsided, or been sidetracked in the intervening decades.

While even a cursory summary of the developments of the past hundred years is far beyond our present scope, an argument could reasonably be made that what Simmel saw as an attack on form per se morphed into an embrace of the diversity of available forms, a rejection only of the claim to hegemony by any single formal thematic. In the arts, the earlier 20th century saw attempts—as with Socialist Realism—to impose a dominant aesthetic (typically in service to a totalitarian regime), but these aesthetics survive more in parody than otherwise. The birth of new nations and the end of traditional colonial empires in the middle decades of the century dramatically enlarged the realm of aesthetic possibility, encouraging the juxtaposition of cross-cultural borrowings and conversations. By way of a particular example, the musical album *Lambarena: Bach to Africa* (Courson, Akendengué, & Bach, 1993) reimagines the auditory experience of Albert Schweitzer in Africa by overlaying tracks of Gabonese folk music on top of selections of Schweitzer's beloved Johann Sebastian Bach. In addition to its fascinating cross-cultural reimagining, the album is thought-provoking in another way: as tempted as we may be to emphasize—rightly—the incomparable virtuosity of Bach's counterpoint as the apotheosis of form in music, the album might remind us also of his own radical daring in setting liturgical texts to contemporary dance forms.

In the religious realm, similarly, the 20th century experimented early and calamitously with attempts to harness religious or quasi-religious fervor to the aggrandizement of totalitarian states. This was hardly a new phenomenon in kind (at least in the West)—late 19th century Anglo-Protestant hymnody, for example, is replete with chest-thumping tunes enlisting the Christian Church Militant in the service of the imperial war gods. The 20th century totalitarianisms, though, attempted to accomplish the same quasi-religious martial ardor for the State while eliminating the Christian content altogether, though these attempts ultimately ran aground. More recent decades have seen a wider global dispersion of religious conversations, with the Catholic Church moving beyond its traditional (but increasingly secularized) Western European centers toward the Southern Hemisphere, and the growth in awareness and imitation of Eastern spiritual traditions and quasi-spiritual practices in the West. While these movements have opened the possibilities for a wider, more diverse, and more inclusive global spiritual conversation, however, recent years have also seen vehement and increasingly violent reactionary movements in which traditional religious language is deployed to foment, exploit, and (literally) weaponize otherwise fading cultural

divisions, not infrequently to the benefit of economic and political elites. Of the latter variety, George W. Bush's political strategist Karl Rove's "culture war" strategy in the 2004 US Presidential election is among the more notoriously and cynically explicit examples. While these reactionary movements have captured outsized media attention through a set of dramatic events (ranging from terrorist attacks to apocalyptic Presidential tweets), however, their longer-term prospects are on the whole far less ominous. An especially interesting indicator emerges from one of the most dramatic turnarounds in public opinion ever recorded in the United States: support for same-sex marriage. While opposition to same-sex marriage was a religiously voiced, and highly successful, mobilizing issue for cultural conservatives—and a painful "wedge" issue for Democrats—in the 2004 US Presidential election, ten years later same-sex marriage was the law of the land, supported by sizable majorities of the American public.[2]

So if we want to identify a continuation of the attack on form per se that Simmel saw a hundred years ago, which way do we look? Toward the growing acceptance and institutionalization of increasingly diverse forms of lived human experience, as against more traditional institutional arrangements of family, church, state, and so on? Or toward the gaping irony that the loudest and most chaotic attacks on already-institutionalized diversity currently come from the person occupying one of the most institutionalized offices of all, the Presidency of the United States?

3) Is there a hidden king for us, a leading idea or imaginary that can resolve/restore/renew our common life in the 21st century, and what would such an imaginary look like?

Before we address this question, it is worth a moment to consider certain characteristics of our current situation, including the concentrations of established interests and cultural investment in opposition to which we might envision the emergence of a hidden king.

A preeminent feature of our age that distinguishes it from any previous historical period is the threat of global annihilation, posed initially by nuclear weapons, and latterly by the effects of human-induced climate change. These two threats differ in significant ways: in their potential imminence and consequently in their divergent generational impacts; in their complexity of understanding and appropriate collective response; in the constellation of interests arrayed for and against addressing them; and in the degree and manner to which quotidian culture has metabolized and adapted

[2] In a 1996 Gallup poll, 27% of Americans supported legalization of same-sex marriage. By 2004, when Massachusetts became the first state to proceed with legalization, this figure had risen to 42%. In 2015, a US Supreme Court decision made same-sex marriage a legal right in all 50 states, and as of May 2017, 64% supported same-sex marriage.

itself to their presence—along a continuum, one might cynically suggest, running from willful ignorance to informed fatalism. For all of their difference, and for all of the indifference that pushes them out of daily attention for most people, however, their common global scope brings with it the engagement of more and more diverse persons and groups than in any previous era, and especially with human-induced global warming, an unprecedented complexity in developing the full range of technically feasible responses required, while simultaneously creating and moving forward the new social, political, and economic mechanisms and channels for collective action without which technical solutions cannot engage.

A second and related feature of our current situation would be more familiar to Simmel, namely, the increasing fluidity of capital and concentration of its ownership. This paper cannot add much to the voluminous discussion of this issue. Suffice it here to observe and/or reiterate a couple of key elements: first, the increasing dislocations and jilted expectations produced by capital flight make for increased disjunction between is and ought for more and more persons and groups—whether this results merely in feckless rage or in deeper transformation remains to be seen. Second, the dynamics of capital are not univocal, and have implications for what sort of "hidden king" might emerge as a leading idea for the future. In particular, the powerful interests associated with fossil fuel production have an obvious interest in extracting every last bit of profit and/or government subsidy from an asset base that is either already dying (e.g., the US coal industry) or will drop sharply in value (petroleum, corn-based ethanol) if/as/when cleaner energy production technologies replace them. Arrayed against these interests are purveyors of those newer technologies, whose stock-in-trade lies more with innovation than with long-entrenched lobbying power. Industries with fixed and/or immobile, localized assets (and services like hands-on health care, campus-based education, etc.) generally are pitted against those whose assets are more movable. Complicating this struggle over the circulation of these elites is the all-weather power of finance capital, which acts as a soldier of fortune on both (or rather, all) sides. Some of these various groups may well provide followers for a new hidden king, while in turn shaping the outcome, and others will be implacably opposed.

To these distinctive features so far mentioned—the emergent threats of truly global catastrophe; and the accelerating pace of capital dislocation and concentration, along with its own internal conflicts—it is important to add one more. If Simmel's era demanded a *Philosophy of Money* to address the core cultural product and driver of cultural, social and psychological change in modernity, then the key concerns of our own era may well demand a "philosophy of information." This is hardly to suggest that money has faded in importance since Simmel's days—quite the opposite—but the dynamics of money are now far more entangled with the dynamics of information, and it is plausible to say that the very nature of money itself has assumed a radically

different character in the digital age, in which massive transfers of wealth are effected in fractions of a second by algorithm alone, untouched by human hands.

To call ours the Information Age is perhaps to suggest much and deliver little. In a very broad sense, we might say that the information age began with the rise of mass media—national newspaper chains and syndicates created over a century ago, and already on Simmel's horizon, followed by radio, television, and so on. A second inflection point occurred with the early days of mainframe computing in the late 1950s and 1960s, and its twinned correlative anxieties of job destruction through automation and implicit threats to privacy and personal freedom arising from highly concentrated databases controlled only by the largest organizations. A third era began with the arrival of personal computing in the early 1980s, followed by the explosion of Internet capability in the late 1990s and its viral, worldwide dissemination through smartphone technology over the past decade or so. Digitized information—practically nonexistent as recently as six decades ago—now reaches into every corner of our lives: from the computerized map of the human genome to the coffee maker on the kitchen shelf, our lives are in*form*ed more thoroughly and pervasively than perhaps ever before.

Much of this digital in-*form*-ation is systematically monetized and controlled by vested interests in ways that resemble the fears of skeptics of the 1960s. In particular, threats to electoral systems through microtargeted political messaging, Internet-weaponized misinformation campaigns, and exploited vulnerabilities in electronic voting systems are especially worrisome challenges to the functioning of democratic institutions. Digitally weaponized identity politics steers us into larger collectivities and tribes, historically pre-formed and loaded into the algorithms—of race, nationality, sexual identity and preference, generation, economic class, or political party. More generally, in our economic as well as political choices, we worry about the commodification of our identities and our attention; we fear that our individuality is increasingly objectified, repackaged, and sold back to us in the form(s) of overlapping marketing profiles; our votes and our attention are formed and reshaped by commercial augury of what we bought yesterday; and with biometrics and genomic information increasingly available, even our physical characteristics are no longer entirely our own.

Threats of organized domination are one thing, but there is another concern that arises along with our technological and digital capabilities: the risk of chaos originating in and as a result of the very complexity of our digitized systems. It is one thing to feel manipulated by the powers of evil schemers, and quite another to feel at risk of getting caught up in the machinations of a fatal mistake that turns out to be, in some pitiless sense, no one's fault—the victim of an accelerator pedal that sticks because of a minute, barely detectable flaw in a million lines of computer code.

Alongside these concerns, it is also true that the availability of any amount of information on any subject literally in the palm of one's hand is in its own way breathtaking. Far beyond merely being the sum of its individual data points, the Internet has also become the living repository of the repertoire of scripts, images, tropes, and narrative frames by which we apprehend and synthesize these data points—collectively. It could be that one of these narrative frames might be or become a hidden king for our time—that there is a unifying idea or challenge waiting to emerge to address the deepest global threats we face—that even now, mobilization around climate change (for example) is coming to a tipping point past which our ethics will shift their focus toward preservation of the planet above more traditional and/or personalistic concerns. Perhaps the fossil fuel forces of reaction are past the point where defeat is inevitable, and are now only looking for a way to leave the scene with as much scavenged wealth as they can. Perhaps the victory of a green hidden king, with a global ethic, a new model for social interaction through global awareness and community, and a rewritten or rediscovered history of communitarian accomplishment, can bring us through a climactic battle with the forces of reaction to a resolution of these deep challenges. Certainly, despite the bleakness of the current reaction, there are seeds of hope in the strength and vocality of opposition voices. But optimism here must confront the reality that with the flood of new information capacity come the accelerating ramification and accumulation, not just of what we think we understand, but even of the imaginaries by which we understand what we think we understand. As with money, digital technologies both vastly expand the reach, and yet in many respects, trivialize the import of our knowledge. What's more, we are flooded with stimuli, crowded on all sides by clamoring voices and cascading images breathlessly demanding our attention—payable in purchases, votes, or clicks—to an extent that even the very breathlessness itself begins to feel quotidian and mundane, and amplify the *Blasiertheit*, the blasé attitude, for which Simmel's essay "Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben" (Simmel, 1971) is best—and, as Goodstein argues: quite misleadingly (Goodstein, 2017, p. 105ff.)—known.

But, as Simmel knew better than his subsequent commentators, the blasé attitude is by no means the end of the story. Digital information along with its diversifying heuristics can also empower us to pursue far more effectively our own goals and values, seek out like-minded persons with whom to collaborate, and so on. The same algorithm that microtargets us for others' purposes also assists us in building such connections ourselves, and to a degree, achieving ends we have ourselves chosen. The peculiarities of this relationship between ourselves as choosers among alternatives given to us by the enculturated choices of our own past, aggregated and accelerated as these are to the nanosecond, means that we cannot escape objective culture, and paradoxically, it cannot escape us either. The narratives it supplies for us, and those that, through persistent exploration we discover farther and farther afield with the assistance of digital tools, are selected, applied, and recombined by us ourselves if and

as we choose—always with the constraints specific to our historical time and place, and subject to the resistance as well as the potentialities of our life-as-form. Indeed, Simmel's "individual law" (Simmel, 2010) requires each of us, as our highest ethical duty, to bring the whole of our own particular past and future into our present choices.[3] Yet, because our life itself is a social as well as individual one, the choices we make affect, shape, and constrain others, just as the choices of others affect, shape, and constrain us. The narratives we adopt, just like the screens we click, are not only our own individual choices, but reflect the history we are given at this moment by the choices of numberless others, and have consequences for ourselves and for numberless others who follow. We are not each alone, yet each of us is free and deeply responsible, even for the forms by which we inform—and form—ourselves and each other.

So we find ourselves, each of us, at a point of unstable, even dangerous, disjunction between Is and Ought; we find ourselves caught up in webs of associates who may support us, with differing and conflicting understandings of who we are and what happens next; we carry our history with us in every moment, and read and rewrite it continuously to find our own legitimacy; we choose at every moment whether to conceal or disclose the secrets of our own worth, value, and values, knowing that others would keep us deprived of these, by force if necessary, and we have—all of us—the power in each individual choice, to set the world a little more right. Each of us is, in fact, a hidden king.

Bibliography

Courson, H. d., Akendengué, P., & Bach, J. S. (1993). Lambarena: [Bach to Africa: an homage to Albert Schweitzer]. Sony Classical, SK 64542.

Goodstein, E. S. (2017). *Georg Simmel and the Disciplinary Imaginary*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Simmel, G. (1900). *Philosophie des Geldes*. München & Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot.

Simmel, G. (1918a). Der Konflikt der modernen Kultur: Ein Vortrag. München & Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot.

[3] See also Simmel's Aphorism 69: "Essential life task: to begin life anew each day as though this day were the first—but yet to gather into it all of the past with all its results and unforgotten occurrences and to have them as prologue." (Simmel, 2010, p. 170).

Simmel, G. (1918b). *Lebensanschauung: Vier metaphysische Kapitel.* München & Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot.

Simmel, G. (1950). *The Sociology of Georg Simmel.* (K. H. Wolff, Ed. and trans.) Chicago, IL: The Free Press.

Simmel, G. (1971). Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben. Translated by E. Shils as: The Metropolis and Mental Life, in D. N. Levine (ed.), *Georg Simmel On Individuality and Social Forms.* Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Simmel, G. (2010). *The View of Life: Four Metaphysical Essays with Journal Aphorisms.* Translated by J. A. Y. Andrews, & D. N. Levine. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.