

Matthieu Amat

**Pedagogical Implications of Simmel's Relativism.  
The Strasbourg Lectures on Pedagogy (1915-1916)**

Simmel Studies, Volume 23, Number 1, 2019, pp. 147-182  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1062542ar>

SIMMEL STUDIES  
*New series*



[www.simmelstudies.org](http://www.simmelstudies.org)  
Publisher(s): Georg Simmel Gesellschaft  
ISSN: 1616-2552 (print) | 2512-1022 (digital)

MATTHIEU AMAT

*Pedagogical Implications of Simmel's Relativism. The Strasbourg Lectures on Pedagogy (1915-1916)*

---

Abstract. *Simmel's relativism aims to achieve the modern shift from substance to function without falling into pure sociological functionalism and generalized sceptical dissolution. This relativism would like to be at the same time a theory of objective forms of culture, a critique of modern forms of life and culture and a philosophical practice and attitude. That is why it is always both a philosophy of life and a philosophy of culture. Based on the pedagogy courses held by Simmel in Strasbourg in 1915/1916, this article outlines the consequences of this relativism in terms of pedagogy and philosophy of education. In particular, it considers ways to mitigate the "tragedy of culture", that is to promote the mobility and individuation of life without sacrificing the consistency of objective forms of culture.*

---

**1. The Problem. Dissolution of Substances into Functions:  
The case of education**

In his 1909 “Contributions to the Philosophy of History”, Simmel describes the “social life” as an “interweaving” of “transmission” and “reciprocal action”. Whereas the first process is “the bearer of the spiritual-substantial in the society” – the constitution of an objective culture through “contents” that are to a certain extent “detached from the personality” –, the second designates the “functional” (*das Funktionelle*) in the society – the “pure personal influence of one on the other” (GSG 12: 65-66). The relative weight of each of these processes is likely to vary. In the modern context of “dissolution of substances in functions” (GSG 4: 330), the importance of reciprocal action grows while that of the

process of transmission weakens.<sup>1</sup> This affects education and its conception.

Indeed, education is a “peculiar type of synthesis” between the two processes. It appears at first sight as transmission and tradition: some “results” of the cultural process “are fixed in norms, in rules of life, in principles”, in “educative content or form” and then transmitted from one generation to another. Nevertheless, “it cannot be denied that the education reacts upon the educator” (GSG 12: 67). The pedagogical relationship is always also an interaction. But Simmel goes on:

[O]ne can likely measure the whole progress in the history of education according to how strong the retroactive effect of the educated is on the educator. The more schematic, conservative and limited the education, the more [...] effective is mere tradition [...]. With rising refinement, individualization and cultivation, the educator is himself educated again; i.e. he does not resist his insertion into the process of reciprocal action with the pupil [...]<sup>2</sup> (GSG 12: 67).

Reciprocal action is also reciprocal individualisation: the educator becomes a “man with determined qualities” and not merely a “transmitter”. Whereas authority was “so to speak, the substance of education”, it can now only be its “technique” (GSG 12: 67-68). Social interactions, individualisation and culture converge in this formalisation of the “evolution of education”, which brings together some features of the neo-humanistic model

---

<sup>1</sup> The description of modernity as “dissolution of substances in functions” is a *topos* of Simmel’s work from the early 1890s. See also, for example, GSG 14: 346.

<sup>2</sup> “[U]nd zwar kann man wahrscheinlich den ganzen Fortschritt in der Geschichte der Erziehung danach bemessen, wie stark die Rückwirkung ist, welche seitens des Erzogenen auf den Erzieher stattfindet. Je schematischer, je konservativer, je eingeschränkter die Erziehung ist, desto mehr wird in ihr [...] die bloße Tradition wirksam werde [...]. Mit der steigenden Verfeinerung, Individualisierung und Kultivierung wird der Erziehende selbst wieder erzogen; d. h. er wehrt sich nicht gegen die Einfügung in den Prozess der Wechselwirkung mit dem Schüler [...]”.

of *Bildung* with modern sociological patterns. As we will see, this narrative is too simple and will need to be problematized – for the diagnosis of “crisis” or even of “tragedy of culture” is temporarily set aside.

The brief history of pedagogy which is outlined in the *Schulpädagogik*'s first chapter expands on the statements of 1909: “The ancient pedagogy, until the older forms of humanism, saw the pupil as a passive object to which a certain amount of knowledge and behaviours had to be inculcated”. In contrast, “the tendency of modern pedagogy aims entirely to stimulate the pupil's activity”. It is a “turn” from “passivity” to “activity”, a “cultural trend which culminated in the Kantian-Fichtean philosopheme of self-activity” (GSG 20: 331-332).<sup>3</sup> As a result, two main “consequences” can be stated: “the recognition of the pupil's individuality as determining factor” and “the renunciation of the unconditionality of authority by the teacher”. Along with the individuality of the pupil, that of the teacher also becomes crucial (332). The process of education seems to become a reciprocal and immanent development of the individualities of both the teacher and the pupil.

Does this mean that any third term above the individualities (such as objective norms or cultural contents) should be eliminated to the greatest possible extent, in order to leave the relationship to its own immanent development? “Pedagogy is a living entity which involves a living entity”, Simmel adds<sup>4</sup>. In truth, it is presupposed by its characterisation in terms of reciprocal action – remember that sociology, as a “science of forms of reciprocal action” is also science of “the true life of society”, rather than of “hypostatized, macroscopic and rigid unities and systems” (GSG 11: 32-33). Is that to say that pedagogy is a part of sociology and that the pedagogical relationship should be described as a form of socialisation? How then to evaluate the quality of this reciprocal action? Could a

---

<sup>3</sup> It is Comenius, the “contemporary of Leibniz”, who begins to “see pupils as an active being” (GSG 20: 331).

<sup>4</sup> “Pädagogik ist ein Lebendiges, das Lebendiges zum Gegenstand hat”.

sociological approach to pedagogy be not only descriptive but also prescriptive? We will see that it is not as simple as that: the sociological and functional categories do not suffice to cover the field of education. We will need to reintegrate “substantial” considerations, in a word: the question of objective culture or objective mind. In this regard, pedagogy will have more to do with philosophy of culture than with sociology. What is at issue here is therefore the relation between pedagogy, sociology and philosophy.

## 2. Pedagogical Attitude and Relation: What sort of “mind”?

According to the introduction, the goal of Simmel's pedagogy lessons is “to improve the pedagogical practice” and not to “produce some scholars in pedagogy”<sup>5</sup>. This practice is not a science but an “art”. It is not scientifically and technically objectifiable, and hinges in part on “talent or genius”. However, “there is no art that does not need knowledge” (GSG 20: 317). What is the type of knowledge needed by pedagogy? Rather than stating it explicitly, Simmel says what it is not, by distinguishing it from different candidates. First, it is not “technical knowledge”, in the sense of procedural application of rules. Second, it is not a philosophy or an epistemology which would seek a “formal and conceptual determination” of pedagogy. All questions like: “Is pedagogy an autonomous science or a synthesis of sciences? Is it based on psychology or on ethics?” should be excluded at once. Such disputes “can be settled only in a dogmatic way” and have no effect on pedagogical activity<sup>6</sup> (318). Lastly, pedagogy has to offer resistance against another powerful pretender:

---

<sup>5</sup> Detailed comments on the status of Simmel's *Schulpädagogik* and on the (rare) secondary literature will be found in the introduction of this volume.

<sup>6</sup> Simmel marks its difference with the Herbartian tradition for which the question of the epistemological status of pedagogy occupies an important place. It is known that Herbart searched to found the pedagogy on scientific psychology (see for example Maigné, 2007: 210-214). Simmel discusses many times the Herbartian thesis, explicitly or not. His main source on this point seems to be Barth, 1911.

Some research, the results of which are surely significant for pedagogy, but whose meaning and development belong to completely different scientific domains, has been recently accounted for in the pedagogical literature [...]. The physiological conditions of fatigue at work, psychological experiments on the number of repetitions of senseless syllables required for their memorisation [...], considerations as regards to whether intelligence is a power of deduction or analytical capacity – none of that concerns us here. The intention is focused exclusively on the practice and its spiritual deepening<sup>7</sup> (GSG 20: 319).

This clear distancing of pedagogical thinking from empirical sciences clearly distinguishes Simmel's position from those of many of his contemporaries. Émile Durkheim wrote in 1905, for example, that “as of now, sociology is able to provide all of the guidance necessary for elementary education” (Durkheim, [1905] 1975: 336). A few years earlier, John Dewey had welcomed progress in the “psychological” and “social sciences”, claiming that “all resources of sciences could be used for educational purposes” (Dewey, [1895] 1972: 95). Simmel's position contrasts with that of Ernst Meumann or Paul Barth as well, psychologists who defended an “experimental pedagogy” by means of psychological research – which does not prevent Simmel from quoting their works in his lecture.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> “Man hat neuerdings in die pädagogische Literatur Untersuchungen einbezogen, deren Resultate zwar für die Pädagogik wichtig sind, die aber in ihrem Sinne und Verlauf als Untersuchungen in ganz andere wissenschaftliche Interessengebieten hineingehören und auch in diesen verbleiben. [...] [D]ie physiologischen Voraussetzungen der Arbeits-Ermüdung, die psychologischen Experimente darüber, wie oft sinnlose Silben wiederholt werden müssen, um sich einzuprägen [...], die Erwägungen, ob Intelligenz mehr Kombinationsgabe oder mehr analytische Fähigkeit ist –, gehen uns nichts an. Die Absicht geht durchaus auf die Praxis und ihre geistige Vertiefung”.

<sup>8</sup> Wundt's disciple Ernst Meumann (1862–1915) was professor of psychology in Zürich starting in 1896, where he founded the *Psychologisches Laboratorium*, forerunner of the *Psychologisches Institut* which still exists today. Simmel frequently quotes Meumann's lessons on experimental pedagogy (Meumann, 1911). Paul Barth (1858–1923) was professor of philosophy and pedagogy in Leipzig from

Pedagogical thinking must also resist on three fronts, so to speak, against three forms of objectivism: technical, epistemological and scientific. None of these perspectives or areas were able, strictly speaking, to give pedagogy its due and contribute to its “spiritual deepening”.

What can be said positively of this pedagogical knowledge? The answer may seem disappointing: “One should presuppose from the outset that anyone who has been educated knows approximately what is meant by pedagogy” (GSG 20: 318).<sup>9</sup> Simmel says no more. In this view, the goal of the lectures is to clarify what is already pre-understood, through a personal experience of education. Pedagogical knowledge belongs not to the area of “principle[s]”, nor to that of “pure technical operating methods”, but to a “*middle area*” (Ibid.). One should settle for the living reality of pedagogical practice and relations. This knowledge is the spirit of a practice – a practice that could suffer from lack of spirit.<sup>10</sup>

The ultimate goal is to achieve the *pedagogical attitude of mind* [...] that gives the praxis of each individual task the right note and

---

1897 to 1922. His *Elemente der Erziehungs- und Unterrichtslehre* (Barth, 1911), which was published in eight editions between 1906 and 1922, served as the handbook of “educational sciences” (see Lehmann, 1922–1923, vol. 1: 18). It is also often quoted by Simmel. Sure of its legitimacy, experimental psychology goes as far as to say that it renders unnecessary the philosophical apprehension of pedagogical problems – the Wundtian psychologist and professor in Leipzig Johannes Kretzschmar even entitled his book *The End of Philosophical Pedagogy* (Kretzschmar, 1921).

<sup>9</sup> “Ohne Weiteres ist vorauszusetzen, dass ein jeder Gebildete ungefähr Weiss, was unter Pädagogik zu verstehen ist”.

<sup>10</sup> One thinks of the Hegelian description of school as an “ethical situation” (Hegel, 2006: 483.485). The functional notion of mind or spirit that takes the shape of life, reciprocal action, radiation or atmosphere refers more directly to Humboldt’s description of *Bildung* (see in particular Humboldt, [1794] 1903). As regards the Simmelian notion of “objective mind”, it is now well known that his concept was strongly mediated through Lazarus’ *Völkerpsychologie*, such that it cannot be understood in a strictly Hegelian way (see Köhnke, 1994 : 201-204, 348-354 ; Köhnke, 2003; Geßner, 2003: 94-99; Amat, 2018: 161-179).

intention – which cannot be achieved by means of handling this particular task exclusively, but only by descending into broader, supporting layers<sup>11</sup> (GSG 20: 320).

“Pedagogical knowledge” and “art” meet in “pedagogical attitude”. Pedagogy is a matter of the “right tone”, tact and judgment – a sagacity that allows the solution of problems that are always particular. But this virtue is cultivated by “descending into broader, supporting layers”. From the particular situation down to deeper, broader strata: a familiar feature in the movement of philosophical thought as it has been described since the *Philosophy of Money*. As we will see, what is actually at stake is the educator’s “philosophical mind”, which will make the “pedagogical *a priori*” possible.

If the pedagogical attitude is a condition of a fruitful relationship between teacher and pupil, it should not be forgotten that this relationship is a reciprocal action. Let us recall a Simmelian principle:

[T]he more closely the parts of a correlation point to each other, and the more lively reciprocal action converts their exteriority into mutual dependence, the more spirit-filled does the whole appear<sup>12</sup> (GSG 7: 36).

What is at stake in the pedagogical relation is “to make a common mind (*Gemeingeist*) possible” (GSG 20: 389), that is, a particular “atmosphere” (*Stimmung*) (348). This is fostered, for example, by the aura the teacher emanates to the class, by the “good

---

<sup>11</sup> “[D]ie entscheidende Absicht ist, dass [...] die *pädagogische Einstellung des Geistes überhaupt* erreicht werde, [...], die der Praxis der singulären Aufgabe ihren rechten Ton und Intention gibt, aber durch streng beschränkte Behandlung dieser singulären Aufgabe nicht zu erreichen ist, sondern nur durch Hinabsteigen in die breiteren, tragenden Schichten”.

<sup>12</sup> “[J]e enger die Teile eines Zusammenhanges auf einander hinweisen, je mehr lebendige Wechselwirkung ihr Ausser einander in gegenseitige Abhängigkeit überführt, desto geisterfüllter erscheint das Ganze”.



will” and the “attention” of the pupils (348, 363) and by the fact that the teachers “talk to one another of every possible question” (389). But this “spiritual deepening” has objective conditions as well, starting with the struggle against the “atomisation of the subject matters” (Ibid.). More generally:

It is fundamental that the teacher knows how to evoke the *atmosphere* in the class corresponding to each object. The first condition is that he feels it himself; otherwise every effort would be in vain. [...] The teacher has a dual task, which may perhaps find no analogy in other professions: to work to unify the general pedagogical atmosphere for all objects with the specific one corresponding to the specific object. The teacher's effect beyond the class (astral body) [is] very dependent on his interest in the matter<sup>13</sup> (GSG 20: 348).

Pedagogical effectiveness is individual, but not charismatic. The teacher's aura is mediated by his relationship to the object. It is not self-expression, but the expression of a culture, that is, of a synthesis between life and objective mind. It is a condition for giving the pupils access to the specific experience related to each type of object (aesthetic, logical, historical...). The “common mind” is at the same time functionally and substantially determined. In itself, it shows the limits of a purely sociological description of the conditions under which fruitful pedagogical practice is possible.

### **3. Modern Pedagogy and “Formal Education”: What forms, what objects?**

---

<sup>13</sup> “Sehr wichtig ist, dass der Lehrer die *Stimmung*, die dem Gegenstand jeweilig entspricht, in der Klasse hervorzurufen wisse. Die erste Bedingung ist, dass er selbst sie fühle, sonst ist alles Bemühen vergebens. [...] Der Lehrer hat die Doppelaufgabe, wie sie vielleicht in andern Berufen keine Analogie findet: die pädagogische, für alle Fächer gleiche Stimmung mit der besonderen, dem Gegenstand entsprechenden Stimmung in eins zu arbeiten. Die Wirkung des Lehrers über die Klasse hin (Astralleib) [ist] sehr abhängig von seinem Interesse an der Sache”. Simmel's emphasis.

The turn from substance towards function – and thus: from passivity towards activity – drives toward a “subjectivist” conception of education, characterized by “a backward step from objective content to its spiritual (*seelisch*) support” (GSG 20: 340). Just as the theory of knowledge shifted its focus from the object to the subject, pedagogy began to consider the concrete individual destined to be educated prior to the object of teaching. Using a Pestalozzian expression which has become classical, Simmel speaks of “formal education” or “formal culture” (*formale Bildung*), as opposed to “material education”.

Here the teaching content is contrasted with the spiritual form, which receives it, shapes it, develops it. By intending to train and strengthen the spiritual energy that supports it, rather than demanding it for oneself, one obtains the basis for unlimited further spiritual acquisition<sup>14</sup> (GSG 20: 340).

This formation aims to turn the spiritual energies into certain powers of shaping that can act on all sorts of content. The goal is “to cultivate attention, interest in the teaching content, good will, memory, wit, *purely as spiritual forces*” (Ibid.).<sup>15</sup> Instruction remains an indispensable means for developing and training these forces, but only under certain conditions:

No subject matter should be taught merely so that it is known, so that something already in the book may be found again, with the same rigid contours, in a consciousness. Nothing should be learned that does not yield, besides its substantial content or by means of it, a profit for the pupil’s *life*. The goal of the educator – becoming superfluous – also applies to the contents of education (at least to some of them). After all, one should no

---

<sup>14</sup> “In den Gegensatz zu dem Lehrinhalt setzt man hier die seelische Form, die ihn aufnimmt, gestaltet, entwickelt. Indem man statt nur ihn selbst zu verlangen, vielmehr die seelische Energie, die ihn trägt, ausbilden und stärken will, gewinnt man die Basis für unbegrenzten weiteren geistigen Erwerb”.

<sup>15</sup> Simmel’s emphasis.

longer need Latin or mathematics in order to think rigorously, even if they made this result possible; this function should be detached from its content<sup>16</sup> (GSG 20: 341–343).

Not surprisingly, the idea of cultivation through the transplantation of contents is firmly rejected. Nevertheless, the vitalistic emphasis needs to be tempered. The dissolution of the substantial into the functional does not result in the dissolution of any objectivity, but to a conceptualisation of functions as forms of objectivity. Spiritual energies became autonomous functions through application to objects (like linguistic or mathematical structures) whose form has impressed itself in these energies. In this respect, what are the most favourable objects? Is it the formal disciplines, like grammar and mathematics? Care must be taken not to confuse the two different meanings of “formal”:

The question remains as to whether the form of the mind (as functional, purely internal and shaping) is best shaped by the *objective* formal (languages, mathematics, logic)<sup>17</sup> (GSG 20: 346).

“Formal” sometimes refers to a logical structure, in contrast to a concrete material; sometimes to a living form in contrast to a lifeless content. A formal formation in the first sense of the term will valorise specifically the development of purely intellectual capacities

---

<sup>16</sup> “Kein Lehrstoff soll gelehrt werden bloß damit er gewusst werde, damit etwas, was schon im Buch steht, noch einmal, in derselben starren Umschriebenheit, in einem Bewusstsein sei. Nichts darf gelernt werden, was nicht außer seinem substantiellen Inhalt oder vermittels seiner, einen Ertrag für das *Leben* des Schülers ergibt [...]. [D]as Ziel des Erziehers [...], sich selbst überflüssig zu machen, gilt auch für die Inhalte (wenigstens manche) der Erziehung. Man soll schließlich nicht mehr Latein und Mathematik brauchen, um scharf zu denken, selbst wenn sie wirklich diesen Erfolg hätten, die Funktion soll sich von ihrem Inhalt lösen”. Simmel’s emphasis.

<sup>17</sup> “Ob die *Form* des Geistes (das Funktionelle, schlechthin Innerliche, Gestaltende) am besten durch das *sachlich* Formale (Sprachen, Mathematik, Logik) gestaltet wird, ist doch noch die Frage”. Simmel’s emphasis.

(over ethical or aesthetical capacities).<sup>18</sup> The emphasis put on the form of life and the spirit is precisely a reaction against this intellectualist formalism. The classical notion of “formal education” is reformulated into a relativist (relationist) Simmelian interpretation of Kantian *a priori*.<sup>19</sup> This offers some orientation as to the choice of teaching contents:

I think that a formal culture [...] cannot be achieved through objective formal teaching objects, but rather through objects which bear in themselves a maximum of concrete representations, values and strivings, to which they give spiritual life. Among these are, for example, the consideration of works of art, the knowledge of the social structure of the experienced present, the most common biological and psychological problems<sup>20</sup> (GSG 20: 347).

In other words, formal education needs content, and, indeed, the more concrete the better! Such objects will solicit the most various dispositions and stimulate their reciprocal action, each one making the others resonate like the strings of a musical instrument (Ibid.). The prominent educational value of a work of art lies precisely in the fact that it stimulates a plethora of powers and operations at once. Thanks to its sensory dimension, it can shine in the classroom more easily than other objects, and thus contribute to creating and

---

<sup>18</sup> It corresponds to Hegel’s “*formelle Bildung*”, that is the sense of connections acquired by means of the scientific education – what makes a first articulation of the individual and the universal (but a formal one) (Hegel, 2006: 483).

<sup>19</sup> This links up with Simmel’s interpretation of *a priori* as afterwards formalization of “internal energies” of a “dynamic” and “real function” of the mind (see for example GSG 9: 241).

<sup>20</sup> “Ich meine [...], dass eine formale Bildung [...] gerade nicht durch sachlich formale Lehrgegenstände, sondern durch solche zu erreichen sei, die ein Maximum konkreter Vorstellungen, Werte, Strebungen in sich tragen und seelisch lebendig machen. Dahin gehört z. B. die Betrachtung von Kunstwerken, die Kenntnis der gesellschaftlichen Verfassung der erlebten Gegenwart, die allgemeinsten biologischen und psychologischen Probleme”.

spiritualising a favourable atmosphere.<sup>21</sup> As for sociological, psychological and biological problems, they concern objects whose elements are involved in constant reciprocal actions, in contrast with purely formal objects. On the condition that they do not stiffen into abstract forms, languages and mathematics, too, can possess such qualities and thus comparable pedagogical value (GSG 20: 431-437, 448). Furthermore, the type of organic whole which fosters the culture depends strongly on the period of life. Tales, for example, are particularly fruitful for the child – “as a child and not as a future adult” (343). Against the “teleological mistake” of considering the child as a “little adult”, Simmel claims that “a man is at any moment a whole man”, so that “each moment should be seen as an end in itself” (358-359).<sup>22</sup> In any case, the valuable teaching object is always “a concrete entity which contains a maximum of content that is concretely acting and living” (348).

#### **4. A Bad Formalism and Functionalism: Rhetoric of methods and competences**

While Simmel embraces without hesitation, and even radicalizes – through the lexicon of life – some tendencies of “modern pedagogy” and its subjectivist turn, he strongly opposes other major tendencies. We have already highlighted his rejection of the claims of the empirical sciences to reform pedagogy. Simmel does not return to this point, which is clear from the introduction. But he also breaks with two other powerful trends that are still particularly active: the conception of the individual as bearer and owner of competences and the central role given to the question of methodology in discussions on teaching and learning.

---

<sup>21</sup> This auratic or radioactive effectiveness of concrete objects has been studied by Simmel in his essays on clothes, jewel and adornment (see in particular GSG 8: 386–387).

<sup>22</sup> One can recognize a famous Rousseauist topos, probably mediated by Schleiermacher (see Danner, 1991: 107). Besides, that its part is also a whole is one of the main properties of “life” (see *Rembrandt*, GSG 15: 313 and “Wenn ich die Bilanz ziehe”, GSG 24: 71).

*Empty subjectivities and technical objectivism.* Modern culture is not only characterized by an increase of individualisation. It is a simultaneous process of subjectification and objectification, also manifested in the pedagogical field with its “discipline atomization” and its “abstract intellectualism”, that is particularly manifest in the teaching of Latin and scientific disciplines (GSG 20: 350, 419). They reflect the autonomous nature and the differentiation of sciences, as well as their exponential productions. As in the “older forms” of so-called humanist education, the pupil is forced into “mechanical learning” and subjected to “cold and purely objective demand” amongst the “indifference for life’s values” (331): isolated words rather than living language, dates rather than historical developments, dogmas rather than religious life (334). The “metaphysical presupposition” and fiction of humanistic education – “virtue = knowledge” – has been submitted to legitimate critique, but the question of “the formation of the man as a living whole has been at the same time thrown away”. In this context, the possession of “self-sufficient knowledge” becomes the sole criteria of a successful education (331).

We might think that we have already solved this problem, by defending a formal-subjectivist against a material-objectivist education. However, it is not that simple. The valorisation and stimulation of the pupil’s activity certainly offers means of resistance against the “abstract intellectualism” and “mechanical learning” of a material education. But the objectivist and subjectivist tendencies, although seemingly opposites, could form some unexpected alliances, of which the heralds of modern pedagogy are not always aware and which they may even foster.

With the “backward step from objective content to its spiritual support”, the value and meaning of teaching contents becomes secondary to the value and meaning of the “behaviour of the pupil in his work” (GSG 20: 340). In this context, the claims of the empirical sciences are easy to understand: psychology can pretend to discover and describe the learning process and prescribe

procedures and methods to improve it.<sup>23</sup> The weight of the question: “*how* should it be learned?” increases relative to that one of the question: “*what* should be learned?” (Ibid.).<sup>24</sup> The “improvement of the methods” becomes the main concern of pedagogy – up to and including the contemporary motto: “learn to learn”. Yet, this effort to “improve the subjective factor” gives impetus to a strange alliance, in which the vigorous valorisation of the pupil’s subjective development joins forces with a radical objectification of teaching and learning, with a technical and “scientific” over-determination of the pedagogical thought. In this context, the pedagogical task is to favour and to form “skills”.

However, what is required here is the education of the subject; but this subject is not the quality of the person in itself, the development of its being, but rather an objective achievement, which can be circumscribed as something that is meaningful in and of itself, as it were, separate from the total personality, just as the content of the imparted knowledge. This would be unthinkable for education *stricto sensu*; the quality of personal life, which is supposed to be the result of education, cannot be conceived of beyond this life itself, as is very well the case with gymnastic or linguistic or manual competences<sup>25</sup> (GSG 20: 328–329).

---

<sup>23</sup> Ernst Meumann underlines, for example, that “the major methodological and material innovations of experimental pedagogy” allow “to seek to resolve all of the issues of pedagogy starting from the child” (as quoted in Menzer, 1926: 6).

<sup>24</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>25</sup> “Allerdings ist hier auch die Erziehung des Subjekts das Geforderte; allein dieses ist nicht eine Beschaffenheit der Person, eine Entwicklung ihres Seins, sondern eine objektive Leistung, die genau so umschrieben ist, sich schließlich von der Gesamtpersönlichkeit als etwas für sich Sinnvolles, gleichsam für sich Bestehendes, trennen lässt, wie der Inhalt eines Wissens. Wogegen dies bei der Erziehung etwas Undenkbares wäre; die Qualität des persönlichen Lebens, die das Resultat der Erziehung sein soll, ist nicht jenseits dieses Lebens zu denken, wie es mit dem turnerischen oder sprachlichen oder handwerklichen Können sehr wohl der Fall ist”.

The correlation between the subjectivism of modern times and its massive objectivation processes results in education being seen as the acquisition of a sum of objectified competences supported by an empty and formal subjectivity. But building up skills does not mean developing an individual being. Yet, following this understanding of education, those who pretend to valorise individuality are the same ones who separate it from its activity. Simmel does not mention names or currents explicitly: he describes a global tendency rather than a specific school of pedagogy. One knows the extent to which the lexicon of ‘competences’ has now penetrated the field of contemporary pedagogy. The *Philosophy of Money* showed how the division of labour and the process of objectification ‘causes personalities to disappear behind their functions’ (GSG 6: 395)<sup>26</sup>. The pedagogical phenomenon of this tendency offers a version of what ‘The Concept and the Tragedy of Culture’ called ‘fetishism in the service of “method” – a symptom of the ‘disastrous autonomy’ of the ‘objective mind’ (GSG 14: 409). Emancipation from the overwhelming ‘vertical’ objectivity of the traditional education does not prevent it from being subjected to others’ regrettable forms of objectification – be it technological and functional, or based on formal methods and competences.

*The teacher’s individuality and the question of methods.* This conception of education also applies to the teacher and the teaching: ‘One has submitted the instruction as whole to specified methods’ (GSG 20: 321). That is the first sentence of the chapter 1 of the *Schulpädagogik*, which thus opens with a critique of what one could call ‘methodologism’. The pedagogical attitude cannot be reduced to a mastering of methods:

All methodological principles: inductive, deductive, dogmatic, heuristic, of formal steps, of concentric circles – are schematic abstractions which are of no use to a creative teacher who proceeds in a lively manner. For he has *his* method (that is: he *is* a method), that can be divided into conceptually separate

---

<sup>26</sup> Simmel, 2004: 297.



elements after the fact, but which cannot be rebuilt from them<sup>27</sup> (GSG 20: 327).

We recognize a *topos* of German philosophy: the activity of true individuality cannot be reduced and explained by means of general principles. It does not imply that individuality be conceived as a pure and arbitrary originality. We find a classical version of this tension, for example, in Kant's description of the genius as 'the one who prescribes its rules to art'. Adapted to pedagogy: pedagogical attitude is not reducible to a set of competences that the teacher could describe scientifically and technically, but constitutes the expression of an individuality – which does not mean a singularity without rules, but a proper and individual method.<sup>28</sup> One can indeed recognize, in this polemic against 'Herbart and his school' who 'have divided the learning process into formal steps', the trace of Pestalozzi's genius or Dilthey's developments on this point (GSG 20: 327).<sup>29</sup>

But the emphasis on individuality could conceal another lexicon which is important as well: the lexicon of being. The true learning process is the 'development of [the] being' of the pupil; the teaching process is an expression of the teacher's life: 'He *is* a method'. This

---

<sup>27</sup> "Alle die Methoden-Prinzipien: induktiv, deduktiv, dogmatisch, heuristisch, Formalstufen, konzentrische Kreise – sind schematische Abstraktionen, mit denen ein lebendig schöpferischer Lehrer nichts anfangen kann. Er hat eben *seine* Methode (d. h. er *ist* eine Methode), die man nachträglich in solche begrifflich getrennten Elemente zerlegen mag, die sich aber niemals aus ihnen zusammensetzten lässt". Simmel's emphasis.

<sup>28</sup> This is a variation of the famous Simmelian theme of "individual law". We have shown that it can be understood as an "idea of culture" (Amat, 2017).

<sup>29</sup> See Moreau, 2012: 131–151. Interestingly, Dewey criticises Herbartian theory in similar terms: "It exaggerates beyond reason the possibilities of consciously formulated and used methods, and underestimates the role of vital [...] attitudes". And further: "Thinking *is* the method of intelligent learning, of learning that employs and rewards mind. We speak, legitimately enough, about the method of thinking, but the important thing to bear in mind about method is that thinking is method, the method of intelligent experience in the course which it takes" (Dewey, [1916] 1980: 77, 159; Dewey's emphasis).

ontological lexicon is mobilised against the danger of a purely formalist pedagogy and the understanding of education in terms of property – a trend fostered by the modern scission between subject and object: the educator and the educated become functional subjects that have to acquire and possess some knowledges and competences which they can then use as tools (they *have* methods, competences, knowledges, etc.). The issue is to reintroduce *content* against the danger of formalism, and true *life* instead of a static opposition between subject and object.

‘Content’ and ‘life’: these are certainly fundamental elements of Simmel’s grammar of culture, since culture, as *Bildung*, is the idea of a synthesis between life and the contents of objective mind. That is the problem and the goal of pedagogy: “The relationship between subject matter and human education (*Menschenbildung*) to be produced by pedagogy presents itself as that between objective mind and life” (GSG 20: 334). Fundamentally, the two statements quoted above – “the educator *is* a method” and “anyone who has been educated knows approximately what is meant by pedagogy” – refer to the same essential point: education is a process of cultivation which should be assumed by individualities who have experimented and resolved (*relatively* and in an *individual* way) the problem of the tension between life and objective mind. To that extent, “the educator has to be an *example*”, Simmel elaborates (383).<sup>30</sup>

The rhetoric of “individuality”, “life”, “reciprocal action”, and “formal education” should not only be understood as a means of breaking with vertical, authoritative and “material” education. The truth is that the latter already belonged to the past when Simmel delivered his lectures. He was dealing with a far more dangerous adversary, who could also pretend to aspire to turning away from substance towards function, and to share the goal of vitalization and individualization of education and instruction. If Simmel’s pedagogy is “functionalist”, it is not in the sense of this formal and technical functionalism, which sees the pupil as a functional bearer

---

<sup>30</sup> Simmel’s emphasis.

of competences and aims essentially to improve methods of teaching and learning to that end. In Simmel's case, functionalism – a term that he does not use and which could be misinterpreted – means relativism (or relationism), and this relativism, as we will see, does not sacrifice the question of content, the very stuff of individual life.

## 5. Are Teaching Contents Transcendent? School and ordinary life

It might be objected that, with an emphasis on individuality on the one hand, and on the concrete teaching object on the other, the institutional, technical and psycho-social conditions of education are neglected. But Simmel made clear that his purpose was to foster a “pedagogical attitude” and to clarify the nature of pedagogical relations. That they take place in a more or less favourable context is obvious. However, the very pedagogical factor should not be confused with important factors which are in principle exterior. This concerns even the very organisation of the school:

During these periods, we don't have to deal with *de lege ferenda*, but to accept the school as it is, to ask: how to be the best possible teacher under the conditions of circumstances that the individual cannot change?<sup>31</sup> (GSG 20: 330).

This restriction distinguishes Simmel in the period of *Reformpädagogik*.<sup>32</sup> This point is emphasised again in a letter to Georg

---

<sup>31</sup> “[W]ir haben in diesen Stunden nicht das *de lege ferenda* zu verhandeln, sondern die Schule, wie sie besteht, hinzunehmen und zu fragen: wie kann unter Voraussetzung dieser für den einzelnen nicht zu ändernden Gegebenheit dieser einzelne ein möglichst guter Lehrer sein?” (“*de lege ferenda*” means “future law”, in the sense: “what the law should be”).

<sup>32</sup> *Reformpädagogik* refers to a large spectrum of pedagogical reflections, movements and experiments starting at the turn of the century in Germany. It approximately intersects what the English called “New Education” (see Scheibe, 1969). Simmel was personally acquainted with an important representative of this constellation:

Kerschensteiner. Whereas the latter posits a close relation between the “process of education” and “school organisation”, – as the title of one of his works clearly states<sup>33</sup> –, Simmel aims only to “give the future teacher the necessary *pedagogical attitude*”, abstracting from the “school organisation” (GSG 23: 843).<sup>34</sup> Methodological and institutional questions are set aside in the same way:

Pedagogy is a living entity that has a living entity as its object: it is thus completely inaccessible to the form of the system. A bad method and a bad teaching system, in the hands of a good pedagogue, is still far better than the most excellent objective principles and teaching material used by a poor pedagogue. The teacher may always keep this in mind so as not to surrender too much to his annoyance and opposition against regulations that he considers inappropriate<sup>35</sup> (GSG 20: 327).

The fact that the lecture was held in Strasbourg during the war may have played a role in this caution and neutralisation of the institutional question. However, this position fits in the main with Simmel’s distrust of rigid principles, be they theoretical or practical. To use the judicious expression of Antonio Banfi, the “overcoming

---

Rudolf Pannwitz (1881-1969), who was Simmel’s student in Berlin and preceptor of his son Hans starting in 1903.

<sup>33</sup> This letter was written in response to Kerschensteiner’s sending of his *Grundaxiom des Bildungsprozesses und seine Folgerung für die Schulorganisation* (1917) to Simmel. Referring to Pestalozzi and Dewey, and promoting the *Arbeitsschule*, Georg Kerschensteiner (1854–1932), was appointed royal for Bavarian schools from 1895, and professor of pedagogy in Munich from 1918. Simmel’s influence is clear in the *Grundaxiom* (see Kerschensteiner and Spranger, 1966: 307; see also Gonon, 2009).

<sup>34</sup> Simmel’s emphasis.

<sup>35</sup> “Pädagogik ist ein Lebendiges, das Lebendiges zum Gegenstand hat: also der Systemform ganz unzugänglich. Eine schlechte Methode und Lehrsystem, ausgeübt von einem guten Pädagogen, ist noch immer viel besser, als die vortrefflichsten objektiven Prinzipien und Lehrinhalte, die ein schlechter Pädagoge anwendet. Dies mag sich der Lehrer immer vor Augen halten, um sich dem Verdross und der Opposition über Reglementierungen nicht zu sehr hinzugeben, die er für unzumutbar hält”.

of pedagogical dogmatism” is achieved in all of the dimensions of pedagogical reflection (Banfi, [1932] 1986: 171). Against every ambition of methodological or institutional reform, it is about starting from the middle, from the given pedagogical relation and classroom situation, for the purpose of making it more spiritualised and more lively, that is, as we will now see, richer in meaning.

Besides the technical and methodological proceduralisation of schooling, another impediment to its spiritualisation would be to confuse its “common mind” with the “objective mind” that is eventually transmitted:

The classicist conception that school would be “another world” than the daily life of the pupil, a higher one, to whom the ordinary contents of life appear as lower, unspiritual and to eliminate to the greatest possible extent – this conception confuses subject matter and function in the coarsest way. [...] To see the school as the Other of life, by reason of the contents it deals with – that is simply spiritual materialism, a way of clinging to the material instead of considering its treatment<sup>36</sup> (GSG 20: 344).

A pedagogical tradition that Simmel calls “classicism” promotes the school as an ideal world that gathers cultural contents of outstanding value. The challenge is, therefore, to raise the pupils to the contemplation of these objective contents through a kind of conversion to the ideal.<sup>37</sup> Simmel, who describes the process of culture as a “turn towards the idea”, as a “reversal” from a life orientation “focused on vitality” to one “focused on ideals” (GSG 16: 245, 262), does not definitively and fully reject such a perspective. But he warns of its falling into “spiritual materialism”,

---

<sup>36</sup> Simmel’s emphasis. “Die Vorstellung, die namentlich durch den Klassizismus in der Schule großgezogen ist: die Schule sei “eine andere Welt” als das tägliche Leben des Schülers, eine höhere, der gegenüber die gewöhnlichen Lebensinhalte als die niederen, ungeistigen, möglichst auszulöschen seien – verwechselt in größter Weise die Materie mit der Funktion. [...] Dass aber prinzipiell die Schule auch ihren behandelten *Inhalten* nach das Andere des Lebens sei, ist einfach ein geistiger Materialismus, ein Kleben am Stoff, statt an seiner Behandlung”.

<sup>37</sup> On education as conversion, see Moreau, 2011: 8, 131, 266.

a bad Platonism that suffers from a substantialist conception of culture and from an ontological break between “culture” and “ordinary life” (GSG 20: 344):

The teacher must be accountable for the knowledge which is not acquired at school that he must presuppose in the pupil. The instruction must constantly reach into this fluctuating, individual, highly diverse material; he cannot obtain the understanding of teaching contents in school alone; actually, it offers only syntheses<sup>38</sup> (GSG 20: 344–345).

That does not mean that the out-of-school background is more legitimate, but rather that it constitutes irreducible datum. If the teacher should “not miss any opportunity to start from the pupil’s experiences”, this is “for the purpose of giving them some meaning and value and of relating these to each other” (GSG 20: 344). Teaching aims to deepen the pupil’s experience, to increase the meaning of what is always already given, but poor in meaning. From this standpoint, the school seeks a certain break with the logic of everyday life – but it does not start here, and does not proclaim it or looks for some solution based in continuity. Finally:

In functional terms: as animation and spiritualisation, as deepening and scientisation, the school has to be another world than that of contingent, trivial and subjective life; but that is possible only provided that it admits the *same contents*, that it spiritualises and integrates into higher connections precisely *what* first fills life in a rawer and more isolated form<sup>39</sup> (GSG 20: 344).

---

<sup>38</sup> “Der Lehrer muss sich Rechenschaft darüber ablegen, welche nicht in der Schule erworbenen Kenntnisse er beim Schüler voraussetzen darf. Der Unterricht muss fortwährend in dieses fluktuierende, individuell, höchst mannigfaltige Material hineingreifen, er kann das Verständnis der Unterrichtsinhalte nicht in der Schule allein beschaffen, eigentlich bietet er nur Synthesen”.

<sup>39</sup> Simmel’s emphasis. “Funktionell: als Beseelung und Vergeistigung, als Vertiefung und Verwissenschaftlichung soll die Schule eine andere Welt als die

School is functionally, not substantially, “another world” than the ordinary one. Before transmitting new contents, it proposes new layouts for the contents that the child brings with him. The difference between “teaching contents” and “life contents” lies first in the forms of synthesis that they build. “Scientisation” for example, aspires to the form of general law (GSG 20: 345), but other syntheses are possible – aesthetical shaping, for example, which has the logic of an individual law (GSG 20: 322). The different forms of spiritualisation are semantic perspectives to which one has to bring the child. It is the counterpart, on the pedagogical level, of what Simmel calls “embryonal form[s]” of the “ideal” or “cultural worlds” in his contemporary *Lebensanschauung* (GSG 20: 244). It is a matter of initiating a qualitative “turn towards idea” through which the pupil will discover the objectivity sheathed in his own experience:

To that end, it is true that a *path* must also be taken via other *matters*, and that a world of factual and historical ideals has to be *opposed* to the simple reality.<sup>40</sup>

The prospect is then to integrate the synthesis gradually built up into ensembles “brought” by the teacher: some historically transmitted cultural structures (constituted knowledge, artistic styles, forms of sociability...). The goal is to establish organic relations between actual experiences and given cultural forms. In this process, the objective cultural forms are also transformed in return, so that the “same” objective contents can take on new meanings.

---

des zufälligen, banalen subjektiven Lebens sein; das kann sie aber nur ganz, wenn sie sich *derselben Inhalte* annimmt, wenn sie *das* vergeistigt, in höhere Zusammenhänge bringt, was das Leben in roherer und isolierter Form erfüllt’.

<sup>40</sup> “Dass dazu der *Weg* auch über andere *Materien* genommen werden muss, dass dazu auch eine Welt sachlicher und historischer Ideale der bloßen Wirklichkeit auch *gegenübergestellt* werde, ist richtig” (Simmel’s emphasis).

In this way, we can speak of a relative or functional transcendence of school in regards to “society”, understood as the level of ordinary life. School can offer and favour some forms of socialisation, but does not end in this task (social functionalism). Teaching has to ensure access to a cultural objectivity (logical, scientific, aesthetic...), that can, of course, guarantee some economic and social benefits, but whose specific meaning and validity stand on another level. The description of the pedagogical relation in terms of reciprocal action does not lead to a solely sociological description of education. As we have already highlighted, the “common mind” contains the “objective mind”, so that the turn from substance toward function does not mean a pure functionalisation of life.

## 6. The Philosophical Mind in Teaching

The counterpart of this understanding of the teaching process is a description of the learning process as a continuous expansion of comprehension, through linking the contents more broadly. Provided we use it only as a regulative idea and in a flexible manner, we can use an Herbartian schematization here: 1. “Experience of the object in its facticity” – knowing that “the sensible ‘intuition’ (*Anschauung*) is only *one* kind” of this experience (so that an experience of ideal facticity is possible)<sup>41</sup> –; 2. “Understanding of the object”; 3. “Assimilation in and for the ethical and spiritual development of the global personality” (GSG 20: 322). The following describes what is meant by “understanding”:

The degree of this [understanding] depends on a degree of completion of the first and external intuition. The determinations mutually imply each other; when there is no gap between them, they then form a whole that has an immanent understandability (organs of an animal, details of a narrative,

---

<sup>41</sup> Simmel stands apart from Pestalozzi’s empirism, which proclaims that “the sensible intuition is the absolute foundation of all knowledge” (Pestalozzi, 1801/1932: 309).



course of mountains and rivers in a country). Further understanding is achieved by the integration of the object into a higher whole, or by subjection to laws. For only the law (general or individual) links details to wholes<sup>42</sup> (GSG 20: 322).

Understanding is extensive rather than intensive: not a discover of a hidden meaning, but the constitution of a figure, of a whole with an “immanent understandability”. To understand is to perceive the part starting from the whole, and the whole starting from the part, through the interplay of reciprocal actions. The challenge is to extend a series of representations while guaranteeing them a relative closeness.

To that end, care will be taken to constitute small organic wholes structured around centres, rather than presenting isolated elements or parts of series that are impossible to close. Biological education will present plants or the animals in their “true life, that is, in their reciprocal action with the other beings, with the soil, the air, the light” (GSG 20: 442). Geography will start from the surrounding environment, the “*visible* space” – “the school building, the street, the city” with its particular “climate, vegetation, lighting conditions, soil configuration” – and then extend the perspective towards the distance – not through “local patriotism”, but for pedagogical necessity (GSG 20: 445). While stabilizing the interacting elements, rigid connections and definitive synthesis should be avoided, in order to leave some space and latitude for spiritual mobility and to make possible new enlargements of the circles of understanding:

---

<sup>42</sup> “Dieses [Verständnis] ist schon durch Vervollständigung der ersten und äußerlichen Anschauung bis zu einem gewissen Grade zu erreichen. Die Bestimmungen tragen sich gegenseitig; wenn keine Lücke mehr zwischen ihnen ist, bilden sie nun ein Ganzes, das eine immanente Verständlichkeit hat (Organe eines Tieres, Details einer Erzählung, Verlauf von Gebirgen und Flüssen in einem Land). Das weitere Verständnis wird durch die Einordnung des Gegenstandes in ein höheres Ganzes erreicht, oder dadurch, dass es Gesetzmäßigkeiten unterstellt wird. Denn nur das Gesetz (allgemeines oder individuelles) verknüpft Einzelheiten zu Ganzheiten”.

The connections of concepts need not be loose or dubious; only, they should not form a circle so tightly closed and self-contained that everything new has to be kept out like a stranger<sup>43</sup> (GSG 20: 350).

The constituted wholes are always provisional; they remain open to an indefinite number of new elements. This description challenges the foundationalist and deductive descriptions of teaching, whose ideal is to constitute a firm basis from which series of contents can be progressively developed. In this conception, understanding progresses in a circular form rather than in a straight line. New elements act reciprocally on the ones which are supposed to serve as their basis. Since straight progression and a definitive basis are illusory, what is at stake is to build relative totalities rapidly, not to lay the foundations of a distant system. One can recognize relativism as a principle of knowledge, as it was presented in the third section of the first chapter of the *Philosophy of Money*, in which Simmel gave the “process of thinking” the “form of infinity”; not that of a “direct and continual course”, but of a circle “in which every point is a beginning and an end, and all of the parts condition each other mutually” (GSG 6: 115).<sup>44</sup>

This conception of teaching culminates in an incisive statement: “Each period should be given in a philosophical mind!” It is not a matter of presenting philosophical positions to the pupils – before university, “philosophy as discipline is too difficult” – but of suggesting the possibilities of broader and superior synthesis and of a variation of perspectives (GSG 20: 354). Starting “from the pupil’s experiences for the purpose of giving them some meaning and value and of relating them”,

---

<sup>43</sup> “Die Verbindungen der Begriffe brauchen keineswegs locker oder zweifelhaft zu sein; nur sollen sie nicht einen so festgeschlossenen selbstgenügsamen Kreis bilden, dass alles Neue wie ein Fremdling draußen bleiben muss”.

<sup>44</sup> Simmel, 2004: 116.

[The teacher] should show philosophical mind: that from every point of superficial existence, there is a guideline into its fundamental depths. Of course, this does not need to be philosophical in terms of content, because deepening and interpretation will not extend into the layer of the specifically philosophical. However, the *direction* towards this must be maintained<sup>45</sup> (GSG 20: 344).

We recognize a famous Simmelian motive whose presentation in the preface of the *Philosophy of Money* is well known: “To derive from the surface level of economic affairs a guideline that leads to the ultimate values and things of importance in all that is human”. More generally, the idea is to “fin[d] in each of life’s details the totality of its meaning” (GSG 6: 12).<sup>46</sup> In the lessons of pedagogy, this claim is more heuristic than ever: this is to suggest the infinite which is virtually contained in each particular objective content, as relates to an infinite number of other contents, as it is an element of innumerable possible circles of understanding.

The “pedagogical attitude of mind” is thus a philosophical attitude. Even more than to the *Philosophy of Money*, reference should be made to the “philosophical culture” described in the introduction of the 1911 volume that bears the same name:

[Philosophical culture] does not in fact consist in the knowledge of metaphysical systems or the confession of faith in individual theories, but rather in a consistent attitude of mind toward all that exists, in an intellectual mobility towards the stratum in which, in the broadest variety of profundities and connected to

---

<sup>45</sup> “Hier muss er den philosophischen Geist bewähren: dass es von jedem Punkt des oberflächlichen Daseins eine Richtlinie in seine fundamentalen Tiefen gebe. Inhaltlich braucht dies natürlich nicht philosophisch zu sein, weil die Vertiefung und Sinngebung nicht bis zu der Schicht des spezifisch Philosophischen gehen wird. Allein die *Richtung* auf dieses muss eingehalten werden” (Simmel’s emphasis).

<sup>46</sup> Simmel, 2004: 53.

the broadest variety of actualities, all possible currents of philosophy run<sup>47</sup> (GSG 14: 165–166).

Before objectivising themselves in philosophical theories, these “currents” are regulative ideas which orient the process of thought. Philosophical culture means an incessant animation of objective culture, through changes in perspective, extending series of contents, and increased reciprocal action between their elements – and thus starting not from a basis, but from the middle: from the “broadest variety of actualities” (to begin with what the pupil “brings with him”).

## 7. The Pedagogical *a priori*

In what way does expanding the sphere of understanding contribute to the cultivation of the pupil’s global personality?

The pedagogical task is to select and formulate the subject matter in such a way that it also shows continuity as objective content and thus lends itself to support the subjective continuity<sup>48</sup> (GSG 20: 349).

The challenge is to reduce the conflict between life and contents (objective mind), by giving these a continuity that they do not themselves have, due to their discrete character, complexity, gaps, pure logical form, etc. It is really a question of solving the problem of culture: giving a “cultural meaning” or “value” to contents which first have an “objective meaning” or “value” – in the words of the “The Concept and the Tragedy of Culture” (GSG 14: 400).<sup>49</sup> This

---

<sup>47</sup> Simmel, 1997: 35; translation slightly amended.

<sup>48</sup> “[D]ie pädagogische Aufgabe ist, den Lehrstoff so auszuwählen und zu formen, dass er auch als objektiver Inhalt eine Kontinuität zeigt und sich dadurch zum Träger der subjektiven Kontinuität eignen – was nicht ohne weiteres immer der Fall ist”.

<sup>49</sup> Simmel, 1997: 65.

is one of the purposes of the third and ninth chapters of the lessons: “On Consistency” and “On Teaching of History”:

The decisive motive is the following: what we call consistency or unity in the relational structure of every subject matter is not simply something logical, a formal avoidance of contradictions [...]. Every content is consistent if it not only logically follows the preceding one, but has in itself a relation to the guiding idea, through which it, in combination with the other contents, constitutes a teleological series<sup>50</sup> (GSG 20: 386).

This is not about identifying in the given cultural contents an objective teleology, which should then be presented to the students, but giving the cultural material a form that ensures their assimilation and appropriation in the proper teleology of their lives. This task presents major difficulties:

What is to be communicated and how it has to be ordered, in religious education, in history, in literature, is neither determined directly by the main pedagogical purpose (which is far too general for that and can, at most, decide about particular cases), nor by the current state of science (which is too extensive and incoherent), but only by means of a special *a priori*, one that brings the contents selected for the student into a consistent series<sup>51</sup> (GSG 20: 386).

---

<sup>50</sup> “Das entscheidende Motiv ist: was wir Konsequenz oder Einheit im Zusammenhange jedes Lehrstoffes nennen, ist nicht einfach etwas Logisches, eine formale Vermeidung von Widersprüchen [...]. Konsequent ist jeder Inhalt, wenn er sich nicht nur logisch an den vorangehenden anschließt, sondern sowohl an sich selbst eine Beziehung zur leitenden Idee hat, wie mit den andern zusammen eine teleologische Reihe auf diese hin bildet”.

<sup>51</sup> “Was man in dem Religionsunterricht, in der Geschichte, in der Literatur mitteilt und wie man es anordnet, wird weder unmittelbar durch den pädagogischen Hauptzweck bestimmt (der dazu viel zu allgemein ist und höchstens über das Einzelne als solches entscheiden kann), noch durch den jeweiligen Stand der Wissenschaft (der zu ausgedehnt und zu zusammenhangslos ist), sondern durch

The teacher cannot rely on the *a priori* or regulative ideas which are specific to each science or cultural domain. These are beyond the understanding of the pupil and, above all, not necessarily fruitful from the perspective of learning and education. There thus arises a “conflict between the scientific and the pedagogical consciousness” (GSG 20: 440), such that the latter has to submit its material to a “new shaping”, a “specific *a priori*: the pedagogical *a priori*” (385, 444).<sup>52</sup> But one does not have a sufficiently clear insight of the concrete conditions of an authentic culture of the personality, either. The end of education is distant, the means to reach it are extremely diverse, their real effects imponderable – difficulties that, moreover, are different for each pupil. The “main pedagogical purpose” (the formation of each child as an individuality) provides little help in selecting and presenting the teaching material:

The purely pedagogical or perhaps ethical intention may be the decisive factor: however, it has to be converted into a guiding principle that can be expressed with objective notions, in order to give to the objective content an internal consistency<sup>53</sup> (GSG 20: 386).

---

ein besonderes Apriori, eines, das die gerade für den Schüler ausgewählten Inhalte in eine konsequente Reihe bringt”.

<sup>52</sup> In the teaching of history, for example, the teacher won't start from the presupposition of this or that historiographical school, but will proceed to a “concentration of values around a point”: “strong personalities [...], literary or artistic works, situations that arouse interest for their proximity or distance compared to our religious enthusiasms, the first appearance of contents that are now essential for us”, etc. Thus “relational whole[s]” will be constituted, which then will be “progressively linked to each other” thanks to regulative ideas – to that extent, the idea of universal history, while scientifically obsolete, retains a pedagogical value (GSG 20: 442).

<sup>53</sup> “Mag die rein pädagogische, vielleicht die ethische Absicht das eigentlich Bestimmende sein: sie muss sich in ein auch mit Sachbegriffen ausdrückbares führendes Prinzip umsetzen, um dem Sachgehalt innere Konsequenz zu verschaffen”.

In relation to the idea of culture that gives sense to pedagogy in general, the pedagogical *a priori* is a means: it is a “guiding principle” with local validity, a regulative idea that organises one or another part of teaching in order to integrate it to the development of the pupil’s life.<sup>54</sup> In relation to the forms of objective culture, it is a “second-order principle of consistency” (*Richtungskonsequenz zweiter Instanz*) (GSG 20: 386). That is why the pedagogical *a priori* remains fundamentally dualist. The object for which it is a condition of possibility is a mixed one. It must satisfy the criterion of objective consistency – but a different one than the specific objectivity of each domain of culture – and the criterion of vital and teleological – but artificial – consistency.

It appears again that Simmel tries to offer the pedagogical answer to the problem of culture as it was formulated in *The Concept and the Tragedy of Culture*. The dualism of the pedagogical *a priori* is the counterpart of the “metaphysical form” or “dualistic form of existence” of culture as “objectification of the subject and [...] subjectification of the object” (GSG 14: 390). Simmel states it clearly:

Pedagogy is actually the dualistic science and technique: as its demands always have both a subjective and an objective content, it constantly relies on confections, compromises, and the double standard of its interests<sup>55</sup> (GSG 20: 336).

This dualism also structures the role of the teacher:

---

<sup>54</sup> See on this point Denis Kambouchner’s characterisation of “art of teaching” as “art of presenting or constituting horizons”, by means of what the pupil will “experience a certain transcendence” – a “purely functional” one (Kambouchner, 2013: 95–102).

<sup>55</sup> “Pädagogik ist überhaupt die dualistische Wissenschaft und Technik: Dadurch, dass ihre Forderungen immer zugleich einen subjektiven und einen objektiven Inhalt haben, ist sie fortwährend auf Verschmelzungen, Kompromisse, Doppelwahrung der Interessen angewiesen”.

It comes down to a dualism that is grounded in the position of the educator and teacher in general. On the one hand, he is for the pupil a mediator and executor of objective, supra-personal norms and necessities. [...] On the other hand, however, the educator should also be an *example*, and to that extent he must stand on the level of subjective life, which should be formed after him in the pupil<sup>56</sup> (GSG 20: 383).

The teacher's position is structurally antinomic: he must fade behind the object's proper logic, while giving it a form of life. He has to train the students in experiences and the acknowledgement of objectivities which are in principle independent of their person, but he can do so only by showing a living and personal relationship with these objectivities. As a living synthesis of life and objective mind, his personality, once more, turns into something essential. However, the teacher must set an example less as a "whole man" – the cultivated man of the humanistic tradition – than, in a more circumscribed fashion, through his relation to certain objects. The effectiveness of the pedagogical relation presupposes that the teacher "plunges into the life of his [object] itself and speaks from it" (GSG 20: 446). The teacher's exemplarity is not exactly the exemplarity of its proper life, but already an objectification thereof.<sup>57</sup>

## 8. Beyond Form and Content: Relationship

---

<sup>56</sup> "Es kommt hier ein Dualismus heraus, der in der Stellung des Erziehers und Lehrers überhaupt begründet ist. Er ist einerseits für den Schüler der Vermittler und Vollstrecker sachlicher, überpersönlicher Normen und Notwendigkeiten. [...] Andererseits aber soll der Erzieher doch auch *Beispiel* sein, und insoweit muss er in der Ebene des subjektiven Lebens stehen, das sich beim Schüler nach ihm formen soll" (Simmel's emphasis).

<sup>57</sup> To that extent, the pedagogical *a priori* could be compared with the historical *a priori*: like it – and unlike the ones of the other sciences, including sociology – it is a second order *a priori* that submits already constituted objects to a new shaping and that expresses the individual life of the subject (GSG 9: 273, 296; see Amat, 2017: 67-69 and Amat, 2018: 262-265).



This new version of modern pedagogy's formal education drives at a new formulation of the idea of culture:

Every subject matter reaches beyond itself; it is part of a whole, indeed of many wholes, and only in this context and connections it can really be understood. It is surrounded by graded layers of broader knowledge, which are, after all, only general contours of the widest areas. This expansion, this overview of the entire area must be attained if "culture" [*Bildung*] is to be achieved. Because it has been said, correctly: he who is educated knows where to find what he does not know<sup>58</sup> (GSG 20: 355).

*Bildung* means expanding understanding, that is expanding the reciprocal actions between contents, by integrating them into ever broader wholes. The metaphor of "overview" does not exclude the possibility of several "wholes" competing for the same contents: the unity of an overview is not material, but formal or, rather, functional. It is not a determined worldview, but an ability to orient itself amongst multiple possible perspectives and forms of synthesis.

This idea of culture or education goes beyond the form/content opposition. Form and content ultimately appear as different descriptions of a same reality. The wholes constituted by the expansion of understanding are forms in regard to the contents they relate, but contents in regard to more inclusive wholes. The crucial thesis of formal education: "function has to be detached from its content", must be relativized. From a higher perspective, function is, in itself, content. This relativisation allows the emphasis placed

---

<sup>58</sup> "Jeder Lehrstoff greift von sich aus schon über sich hinaus, er ist der Teil eines Ganzen, ja vieler Ganzen, in deren Zusammenhang er allein wirklich verstanden kann. Er ist umgeben von abgestuften Schichten immer weiterer Kenntnisse, die schließlich nur allgemeine Umrisse weitester Gebiete sind. Dieses Weitergreifen, dieser Überblick über das Gesamtgebiet muss gewonnen werden, wenn 'Bildung' erreicht werden soll. Denn man hat mit recht gesagt: gebildet ist, wer weiß, wo er findet, was er nicht weiß".

on the functional dimension of teaching to be reconsidered. The claim that schooling does not have to transmit contents, but only to integrate given contents to higher wholes, is polemical: it is directed against an intellectualism and objectivism that tend to see education as a transplantation of contents. But one should not over-interpret the statement that the pupil brings contents with him, so that the teacher has only to form them. In fact, these contents already have forms, they are pre-understood. And the synthesis that the teacher helps to constitute can also be seen as transmitted contents, which are likely to be integrated in a new synthesis.

In this way Simmel breaks with the faculty psychology that still pervades the notion of “formal education”. As the separation of form and content, the isolation of spiritual functions from their objects is an abstraction that does no justice to actual spiritual activity. Synthesis is not the activity of a transcendental subject, but an immanent process of reciprocal action between elements, which constitutes the very “substance” or fabric of the “soul” in itself:

For culture is neither the mere *possession* of knowledge contents, nor mere *being* as a contentless constitution of the soul. Those who are cultivated are, rather, the ones whose objective knowledge has entered into the liveliness of their subjective development and existence, and whose spiritual energy, on the other hand, is filled with the widest possible and ever-increasing amount of intrinsically valuable contents<sup>59</sup> (GSG 20: 355).

For the classical understanding of “formal education”, contents are valid only as means. In Simmel’s understanding of culture, they are also valid in themselves: “What Kant says about the man: that he never should be treated simply as a means, but always at the same

---

<sup>59</sup> “Denn Bildung ist weder das bloße *Haben* von Wissensinhalten, noch das bloße *Sein* als eine inhaltlose Verfassung der Seele. Gebildet ist vielmehr derjenige, dessen objektives Wissen eingegangen ist in die Lebendigkeit seiner subjektiven Entwicklung und Existenz, und dessen geistige Energie andererseits mit einem möglichst weiten und immer wachsenden Umfang von an sich wertvollen Inhalten erfüllt ist” (Simmel’s emphasis).

time as an end – that also applies for all the contents of teaching” (GSG 20: 418). This ambivalence should not be reduced. Culture cannot be described only in formal terms, it must give the soul a consistency, material – without falling into a substantialist understanding of life. The abstract opposition between formal and material education is overcome by means of a relativist (relationist) understanding of culture. Putting the matter in the terms that framed the debate in Wilhelmine Germany: the Pestalozzian “formal education” is reformulated with the aid of an Herbartian lexicon – “for Herbart, the formation of circles of thoughts (*Gedankenkreise*) is the entire task of the teacher”.<sup>60</sup> Simmel’s relativism is intended to stimulate the interplay between the formal orientation (the pole of life) and the material orientations of education (the pole of objective mind). However, the perspective does not amount to a total reconciliation. As must often be stressed, in Simmel’s work, the dialectic is “without synthesis”<sup>61</sup>.

## Bibliography

- Amat M. (2017). “Simmel’s Law of the Individual: A Relational Idea of Culture”, *Simmel Studies. New Series*, 2/2017, pp. 41–72.
- Amat M. (2018). *Le relationnisme philosophique de Georg Simmel. Une idée de la culture*, Paris: Honoré Champion.
- Banfi A. (1932/1986). “Il pensiero filosofico e pedagogico di Georg Simmel”, in: Idem, *Opere*, vol. 6: *Pedagogia e filosofia dell’educazione*, G. M. Bertin and L. Schiolo (eds.), Reggio d’Emilia: Istituto Antonio Banfi, pp. 127–173.
- Barth P. (1911). *Die Elemente der Erziehungs- und Unterrichtslehre. Auf Grund der Psychologie der Psychologie und der Philosophie der Gegenwart dargestellt*, Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth.

---

<sup>60</sup> Quoted by Lehmann, 1922-1923, vol. 1: 12.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Landmann, *Einleitung des Herausgebers*, Simmel, *Das individuelle Gesetz. Philosophische Exkurse*, Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp, 1968, p. 7-29 (16).

- Danner S. (1991). *Georg Simmels Beitrag zur Pädagogik*, Bad Heilbrunn: Klinkhardt.
- Dewey J. (1895/1972). “My Pedagogical Creed”, in: idem, *The Early Works 1882–1898*, 5. vol., Carbondale (Ill.): Southern Illinois University Press, vol. 5: *1895–1898. Early Essays*, pp. 84–95.
- Dewey, J. (1916/1980). *Democracy and Education*, in: *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, Carbondale (Ill.): Southern Illinois University Press, vol. 9.
- Durkheim E. (1905/1975). “Remarques sur l’enseignement rationnel de la morale”, in: Idem, *Textes*, Paris: Minuit.
- Geßner W. (2003). *Der Schatz im Acker. Georg Simmels Philosophie der Kultur*, Weilerwist: Velbrück.
- Gonon Ph. (2009). *The Quest for Modern Vocational Education – Georg Kerschensteiner between Dewey, Weber and Simmel*, Frankfurt (Main): Peter Lang.
- Hegel (2006). *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 10.1: *Nürnberger Gymnasialkurse und Gymnasialreden (1808–1816)*, K. Grotzsch (ed.), Hamburg: Meiner.
- Humboldt W. v. (1794/1903), “Theorie der Bildung des Menschen”, in: idem, *Gesammelte Schriften*, A. Leitzmann (ed.), Berlin: B. Behr/Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1903–1920, vol. 1 (1903), pp. 282–287.
- Kambouchner D. (2013). *L’École, question philosophique*, Paris: Fayard.
- Kerschensteiner G. (1917). *Grundaxiom des Bildungsprozesses und seine Folgerung für die Schulorganisation*, Berlin: Union Deutsche Verlaganstalt, 1917.
- Kerschensteiner G., Spranger E. (1966). *Briefwechsel 1912–1931*, Oldenburg: Teubner.
- Köhnke K. C. (1996). *Der junge Simmel in Theoriebeziehungen und sozialen Bewegungen*, Frankfurt (Main): Suhrkamp.

- Köhnke K. C. (2003). "Einleitung", in: Lazarus M., *Grundzüge der Völkerpsychologie und Kulturwissenschaft*, K. C. Köhnke (ed.), Hamburg: Meiner, pp. IX–XLII.
- Kretzschmar J. R. (1921), *Das Ende der philosophischen Pädagogik. Ergebnisse einer Untersuchung zur Entstehungsgeschichte und Erziehungswissenschaft*, Leipzig: Wunderlich.
- Lehmann R. (1922/1923). *Die Pädagogische Bewegung der Gegenwart. Ihre Ursprünge und ihr Charakter*, 2 vol., Munich: Rösl.
- Maigné C. (2007). *Johann Friedrich Herbart*, Paris: Belin.
- Menzer P. (1926). *Leitende Ideen in der Pädagogik der Gegenwart*, Osterwieck: Zickfeldt.
- Meumann E. (1991), *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Experimentelle Pädagogik und ihre psychologischen Grundlagen*, 2 vol., Leipzig: Engelmann.
- Moreau D. (2012). "Le 'génie de Pestalozzi' et la méthode pédagogique : l'art de la métamorphose selon Dilthey", in: Soëtar M. (ed.), *Méthode et philosophie. La descendance éducative de l'Émile*, Paris: L'Harmattan, pp. 131–151.
- Moreau D. (2011). *Éducation et théorie morale*, Paris: Vrin.
- Pestalozzi J. H. (1801/1932). "Wie Gertrud ihre Kinder lehrt", in: idem, *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Ausgabe*, vol.13, A. Buchenau (ed.), Berlin-Zurich: de Gruyter.
- Scheibe W. (1969). *Die Reformpädagogische Bewegung 1900–1932. Eine einführende Darstellung*, Weinheim: Beltz.
- Simmel G. (1997). *On Culture*. Frisby D., Featherstone M. (eds.), London-Thousand Oaks-New Delhi: SAGE.
- Simmel G. (2004). *Philosophy of Money*, London: Routledge.