

From the Iron Cage to Eichmann:
German Social Theory and the Critique of Rationalization

Jennifer J. Benner

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Reading Committee:

John E. Toews, Chair

Uta G. Poiger

Laurie J. Sears

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Department of History

Abstract

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Jennifer J. Benner

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
Professor John E. Toews
Department of History

This dissertation shows how rationalization emerged as a central concern of German social theory in the first half of the twentieth century. I focus on analyses of bureaucracy, culture, war, and an especially rationalized form of labor – white-collar work. The roles bureaucracy and rationalized culture played in the implementation of genocide have proved to be among the most controversial subjects in Holocaust historiography. I reveal the roots of these debates by tracing their lineages back to earlier analyses of rationalization. The thinkers examined in this dissertation asked how rationalization functioned on both the social and individual levels. Over several decades these analyses coalesced into two mutually enforcing discourses and culminated in descriptions of the Holocaust as bureaucratized genocide. The first discourse runs from Max Weber’s analysis of bureaucracy and the “iron cage” of rationalization through to post-war Critical Theory. The second discourse considers how cultural critics, beginning with Georg Simmel, analyzed the impact of bureaucracy and rationalization on the individual. Siegfried Kracauer and his Weimar-era reportage on white-collar workers, or *die Angestellten*, best exemplify this second approach. This group was imagined to be

most representative of a particularly modern problem – the ordering of daily life by rationalization and the declining power of effective individual and collective response to this control. The figure of Weimar’s embittered white-collar worker foreshadowed that of the lowly but lethal bureaucrat made famous by Hannah Arendt, in her description of the Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann, exemplar of the “banality of evil.” These figures presented challenges to the enlightenment ideal of the rational individual, capable of independent and critical thought. I conclude that the first and second discourses converged in post-war debates about the meaning of the Holocaust for ‘enlightened,’ modern civilization. In short, I show how from Weber’s “Iron Cage,” we arrived at Arendt’s Eichmann.

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For Ben

Introduction

From the Iron Cage to Eichmann

Reporting from the first day of Adolf Eichmann's 1961 trial, the writer Haim Gouri described the defendant as sitting "still as a statue" and asked: "What do we have here, an iron will to remain silent or the obtuseness of *a man who does not realize who he is?*"¹ From 1941 until the end of the war, Eichmann was, as SS *Obersturmbannführer* (Lt. colonel) of the "race and resettlement office," in charge of implementing the forced emigration of millions of Jews to meet their deaths in the East. He was one of fifteen Nazi officials present at the Wannsee Conference in January 1942 that marked the beginning of the *Endlösung*, or "Final Solution to the Jewish Problem." Although Eichmann played a crucial role in the perpetration of the Holocaust, he was relatively unknown to those outside the Nazi leadership in 1945. His name was mentioned only infrequently at the Nuremberg trials and he was not pursued aggressively by the Allies.² In fact Eichmann was able to escape from US custody in 1946 and eventually settled, along with his family, in Argentina. He lived relatively openly there until his arrest by the Israeli secret police in 1960.³

Yet the question Gouri asked was not really that simple. For if the answer to "Who is Eichmann?" in 1945 was a SS subordinate of minor importance, by his 1961 trial in Jerusalem for "crimes against humanity," he was already becoming a larger-than-

¹ Haim Gouri, *Facing the Glass Booth : The Jerusalem Trial of Adolf Eichmann*, trans. Michael Swirsky (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 1. My emphasis.

² David Cesarani, *Eichmann : His Life and Crimes* (London: W. Heinemann, 2004), 1-2. The American edition of Cesarani's book is entitled *Becoming Eichmann: Rethinking the Life, Crimes, and Trial of a "Desk Murderer."*

³ In January 2011 the German newspaper *Bild* reported that the West German Government had solid information regarding Eichmann's whereabouts as early as 1952 but failed to investigate. Hans-W. Saure "BND kannte Versteck von Nazi-Monster Eichmann," *Bild*, January 7, 2011.

life figure. Eichmann's dramatic capture and his trial at the hands of his former victims was "among the first 'global media events'" and widely reported on in the international press.⁴ Hastily written biographies of Eichmann begin appearing soon after his arrest. These early accounts fit easily into contemporary understandings of the major Nazi perpetrators. Eichmann was depicted as a rabid anti-Semitic sadist and social deviant – the personification of evil. The Israeli prosecutor, Gideon Hausner, acknowledged that Eichmann was a bureaucrat but was at pains to emphasize the defendant's deep hatred and murder-lust for the Jewish people.⁵ It was Hausner's and the popular view of Eichmann that prompted the divergent response of Hannah Arendt, author of what would become the most well-known and influential account of the trial, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.

Born in Germany and trained there as a political scientist, Arendt went to Jerusalem to report on the trial for the *New Yorker*.⁶ She rejected the prosecution's depiction of Eichmann as a "monster," arguing instead that he was a weak-willed and petty man who was motivated to commit murder more by the desire to please his superiors and advance his career than by ideological commitment or sadistic temperament. Arendt's portrait of Eichmann was radical not because she denied his effectiveness and culpability as an agent of genocide, but because she made him seem ordinary. Eichmann inspired Arendt's great contribution to "the modern vocabulary – 'the banality of evil.'" ⁷ Arendt's interpretation has proved profoundly influential and

⁴ Cesarani, *Eichmann*, 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁶ Arendt became an American citizen in 1950.

⁷ Barry Gewen, "The Everyman of Genocide," review of *Becoming Eichmann* in *The New York Times Book Review*, Sunday May 14, 2006.

enduring. In his recent biography of Eichmann David Cesarani states that anyone writing on Eichmann today works in her shadow.⁸

In the decades that followed Eichmann's trial, historians and social theorists have recast the story of modernity to try and understand how Eichmann's life and career became possible. How had civilization arrived at a place where a man who, in Arendt's phrasing, was "just doing his job" could send millions of innocents to their deaths? Did the Nazis use modern technical-rational means in the service of anti-modern and barbaric ends? Or were those 'ends' products of modern rationalization and 'enlightened' progress itself? These questions are driven by a more fundamental one: Was Eichmann – and by extension, the Holocaust – a historical aberration or a deadly outcome inherent in the very make-up of modern, western society?

To answer these questions, social theorists and historians have looked to the ways in which modern structures and technologies, especially bureaucracy, made the tasks of the perpetrators easier. Many have argued that more important than modern technology itself, was the very 'normality' of practices associated with transportation, production, and the ordering of information that quieted the consciences of ordinary men and women, even as these practices were employed to achieve unconscionable results. Some have gone even further, arguing that the means-end rationality that underlies bureaucracy dominates all areas of modern life and has rendered individual conscience irrelevant if not nullified it outright. Since the 1990s, historians have begun to push back against these readings of the Holocaust and modernity by putting the ideology back into the story of

⁸ Cesarani, *Eichmann*, 15. Cesarani is critical of Arendt's book on several points, see Chapter Four of *Eichmann*.

genocide. In so doing they are also, often explicitly, defending a positive tradition of enlightenment.

Debates about the roles of bureaucracy and ideology respond to a specific historical event, the Holocaust, but one that, for all its uniqueness, demands engagement with larger issues – of terminology, historiography, and morality. The contemporary sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, along with many historians, has argued that means-end rationality freed, and even prevented, perpetrators from reflecting on the nature of their deeds.⁹ Some theorists, most notably Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, have argued the Holocaust is evidence that universal knowledge, the crowning achievement of enlightenment, has been stripped of its liberating potential and turned into a tool of lethally effective domination.¹⁰

The contested field of Holocaust historiography has proved fertile ground for novel and challenging interpretive questions. In this dissertation I ask how “new” these questions really are by tracing their lineage back to a key concern of German social theorists writing in the first half of the twentieth century. The work of these thinkers centered on the problem of rationalization and asked how it functioned on both the social and individual levels. Over several decades these analyses coalesced into two mutually enforcing discourses, or traditions of critique, eventually culminating in descriptions of the Holocaust as bureaucratized genocide. The first discourse runs from Max Weber’s

⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment : Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2002). Hereafter *Dialectic*; Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik Der Aufklärung : Philosophische Fragmente*, 13. Aufl. ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2001). Hereafter *Dialektik*. In this dissertation I follow Horkheimer and Adorno’s usage and treat “enlightenment” as a general process of change which accompanied the growth of modernization in the West, rather than as a specific intellectual movement of 18th century France. Therefore, I have elected to leave the term un-capitalized.

description of bureaucracy and rationalization through to post-war Critical Theory. The second discourse considers how cultural critics, beginning with Georg Simmel, analyzed the impact of bureaucracy and rationalization on individual lives in the modern world. Siegfried Kracauer and his Weimar-era reportage of white-collar workers, or *die Angestellten*, best exemplify this second approach. I ask how and why this group was imagined to be most representative of a particularly modern problem – the ordering of daily life by rationalization and the declining power of effective individual and collective response to this control. I argue that *die Angestellten* (and the petty-bourgeoisie more generally) are, by virtue of their unique position in the worlds of capital and culture, especially suitable subjects for critiques of rationalization and bureaucracy. The image of Weimar’s embattled and embittered white-collar worker, or *Angestellter*, along with that of the lowly but potentially lethal bureaucrat, present challenges to the enlightenment ideal of the rational individual, capable of independent and critical thought. I conclude that the first and second discourses continue and converge in post-war debates about the meaning of the Holocaust for ‘enlightened,’ modern civilization. In short, I am showing how from Weber’s “Iron Cage,” we arrived at Arendt’s Eichmann.

This story begins in the second half of the nineteenth century when Germany experienced rapid industrialization, urbanization, and population growth. The fears broached generations earlier by the European literati about a “mechanical” society seemed to come to fruition as the bureaucratic model of rationalization moved from the state to corporate capitalism and all the way to the floors of small offices and department stores. Accordingly, the industrial model of wage labor expanded to include the emerging class of metropolitan salaried employees, *die Angestellten*, who were key consumers of

mass culture and modern entertainments. As German social theorists begin to study these changing times, they also sought the best methods for analyzing modern problems and possibilities. Consensus was hard to come by. The totalizing theories of history and society (sometimes called ‘master narratives’) promoted by an earlier generation of thinkers had given way to what seemed to be an endless series of critiques with no clear ends.

In one of his last essays Georg Simmel remarked on this situation, noting that the nineteenth century “with its motley variety of intellectual currents” failed to produce an all-embracing cultural form comparable to Greek classicism or the European Renaissance. However he qualified his assertion, arguing: “If we restrict ourselves to the human sphere, we might here speak of the idea of society, which in the nineteenth century is proclaimed for the first time to be the true reality of our lives, reducing the individual to a point of intersection of various social series, or even a hypothetical entity such as the atom.”¹¹ The “true reality” of modern lives is that each individual, no matter how powerful, is constituted by forces – social, economic, and cultural – much larger than his or her control and comprehension.

Even as modernization empowers individuals, it undermines their autonomy; while it frees them (to varying degrees) from the traditional constraints of family, class, and religion, the necessities of daily existence are dependent on a rapidly growing number of people and technologies which individuals can neither understand or control. As rationalization advances, all problems become technical ones to be solved by the most

¹¹ “The Conflict in Modern Culture” (1918) in Georg Simmel, *Simmel on Culture : Selected Writings* (London: SAGE, 1997), 79. ; “Der Konflikt der modernen Kultur” in Georg Simmel, *Aufsätze Und Abhandlungen : 1909-1918*, 1. Aufl. ed., 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), 153. Weber also describes the individual as the “atom” of sociology. Max Weber, "Some Categories of Interpretive Sociology," *Sociological Quarterly* 22, no. Spring (1981): 158.

effective method, or “means,” to serve a given end. Practical explanations abound, but questions about the desirability of such ends fall by the wayside. The problem of rationalization is essentially this – how does the individual fare in a world that is both increasingly complicated and increasingly explainable? The modern world is infinitely quantifiable, but drained of meaning in qualitative terms: it can answer “How?” but no longer asks “Why?” Weber puts the problem succinctly in one of his final lectures: “All natural sciences give us the answer to the question: what should we do, *if we wish to control life technically? Whether we should control it technically or indeed wish to, and whether that in the end has any meaning, are questions which science does not go into.*”¹²

In this dissertation I show how rationalization emerged as a central concern of German social theory in the first half of the twentieth century. I then explore the forms that the critique of rationalization took, most specifically by focusing on analyses of bureaucracy, culture, war, and an especially rationalized form of labor – white-collar work. In so doing I aim to reveal the roots of the debates surrounding bureaucracy and the Holocaust.

The dissertation itself is divided into four chapters. In the first, “Max Weber and the Analysis of Rationalization,” I outline Weber’s treatment of bureaucracy and rationalization in the context of the developing sciences of society and culture in Germany. In “Georg Simmel and the Philosophy of Rationalization,” I ask how Simmel’s analysis of modernity and culture speak to the first discourse, and how his innovative cultural criticism lays the groundwork for the second discourse. In the third chapter,

¹² Max Weber, “The Vocation of Science,” in *The Essential Weber : A Reader*, ed. Sam Whimster (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004), 278. I prefer this translation to the one in Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York,: Oxford University Press, 1946, 1958), 144. ; Max Weber, “Wissenschaft Als Beruf,” in *Geistige Arbeit Als Beruf* (München und Leipzig Duncker & Humblot 1919), 34. Weber gave the lecture in 1917.

“Siegfried Kracauer and the Rationalized World of *die Angestellten*,” I analyze Kracauer’s reportage on the working and leisure lives of Weimar Berlin’s salaried employees. In the fourth and final chapter, “Explaining Eichmann: Post-Fascist Critiques of Rationalization,” I examine three responses by critical theorists (and their critics) to the Holocaust: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and Zygmunt Bauman’s *Modernity and the Holocaust*. These are key texts in debates about the relationship between the Holocaust, enlightenment, and modernity.

A note on terminology

I have tried to be as precise and consistent as possible in my use of what I consider to be the key terms of my argument: social theory, rationalization, and discourse. At the same time these are broad terms, and I concede that I have often relied on their expansive, even open-ended meanings, to bring diverse strands of analysis together. To demonstrate how these terms function in my argument, I will briefly outline the thinking behind my usage.

I originally conceived of the thinkers under discussion here as “sociologists” and the work they produced as “sociology.” But I ran into a number of problems with this terminology. To begin with, many of these thinkers were only posthumously identified primarily as sociologists (Weber), were equally active in other disciplines (Weber and Simmel), were never explicitly associated with institutional sociology at all (Kracauer), or were engaged in a purposely unique method of critique (Critical Theory). Secondly, what counts as “sociology” has changed in the discipline’s one hundred plus years, and

varies considerably from Europe to North America. The terms ‘social theorists’ and ‘social theory’ are more appropriate to my study because they imply practitioners, approaches, and subjects that are not limited by disciplinary, institutional, or national boundaries. Alex Callinicos offers a useful definition of social theory in his book, *Introduction to Social Theory*:

1. It is concerned with society, which is conceived as being distinct from political institutions;
2. It distinguishes between and seeks to make generalizations about different kinds of society;
3. It is concerned in particular to analyze modernity – the form of society which emerged in the modern West over the past few centuries and has come to dominate the world as a whole.¹³

The key thinkers treated in this dissertation are all concerned with what society is and how it should be analyzed. More broadly they ask how their own society – modern, Western, heavily rationalized – determines the range of meaning, action, and autonomy allowed the individual.

Rationalization

There are two distinct but related concepts of rationalization treated in this dissertation: the broad ‘Weberian’ one and a more historically specific ‘Weimarian’ one. The distinction roughly follows the parameters of the first and second discourses. In Weimar Germany proponents of rationalization believed the application of the principles

¹³ Alex Callinicos, *Social Theory: A Historical Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 10.

of scientific management to the workplace (and the home as well) would increase efficiency, producing a higher yield with less labor and consequently raise standards of living. Chapter Three treats this type of rationalization in detail, especially as it impacted the lives of the subjects of the second discourse, *die Angestellten*.

The ‘Weberian’, or first discourse, considers rationalization as a large-scale historical phenomenon that underlies the rise of the scientific world-view (and the diminishment of the religious one) along with the increasing power of bureaucracy as an essential component of both the modern state and the capitalist economy. In the first discourse rationalization has three essential characteristics: It reduces value to a purely quantitative measure; it closes-off questions relating to larger meaning; and finally, it promotes abstraction and intellectualization, or as Weber describes it: “the belief that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.”¹⁴

The abstraction demanded by rationalization is most pronounced in bureaucracies. Jim Faught nicely summarizes Weber on this point:

Bureaucracy is a form of administrative domination organized according to rational principles corresponding to those calculative procedures found in capitalistic markets. Typical of bureaucratic organizations is the division of tasks and assignments of responsibilities to offices in *which an individual makes decisions with reference to abstract norms*.¹⁵

Here the division of labor, demanded by capitalist production, means not only breaking down a large job into smaller parts, but standardizing the procedures for each individual

¹⁴ Weber, *From Max Weber*, 139.

¹⁵ Jim Faught, "Neglected Affinities: Max Weber and Georg Simmel," *The British Journal of Sociology* 36, no. 2 (1985): 164. Faught is summarizing Weber's *Economy and Society* page 956. My emphasis.

performing them, so that they act not as individuals so much as functions in a system. In Simmel's description, rationalization, as embodied in the modern money economy, means, "we do not ask *what* and *how*, but *how much*."¹⁶ Simmel could also add that we do not ask *who*? Rationalization privileges systems over people. Writing in 1911, the American efficiency expert Fredrick W. Taylor put it simply: "In the past the man has been first; in the future the system must be first."¹⁷ With this chilling sentiment (which Taylor pronounced with enthusiasm), the two discourses meet. For like the discourses themselves, the two kinds of rationalization are mutually reinforcing. Simmel describes the process whereby large social changes, such as the growth of the money economy, influence individual behavior: "The money economy enforces the necessity of continuous mathematical operations in our daily transactions [. . . and] the reduction of qualitative values to quantitative ones."¹⁸ As the second discourse demonstrates, rationalization is not confined just to factories and offices, but colors everyday life, which increasingly becomes a series of calculations.

Discourse

The analyses of rationalization and bureaucracy discussed in this dissertation coalesce around two discourses which I have identified as 'first' and 'second.' 'Discourse' is an amorphous term, but one that is still useful when describing the treatment of a set of related historical, theoretical, and critical problems by diverse

¹⁶ Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby, 2nd enl. ed. (London ; New York: Routledge, 1990), 259. ; Georg Simmel, *Philosophie Des Geldes* (Leipzig: Verlag ven Duncker & Humblot, 1907), 269.

¹⁷ Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York ; London: Dover, 1998), iv.

¹⁸ Simmel, *Money*, 445.

thinkers. As I have indicated, the two discourses often overlap and their separation is an organizational tool more than a hard and fast distinction. As an organizing device, the category of discourse helps bring together thinkers and texts that are not transparently related to one another – for example, Weber’s description of bureaucracy and Arendt’s portrait of Eichmann. At the same time, by defining a set of concerns, the concept of discourse helps illuminate the parallels and departures where there are known relationships between thinkers -- as between Weber and Simmel, Simmel and Kracauer, and Kracauer and Adorno. Finally by providing chronological and theoretical parameters, the category of discourse situates ideas and thinkers in their historical context. Yet while these shared contexts and influences are real, discourses are always to some degree artificial constructions.

The terminology ‘first’ and ‘second’ is not perfect. On the one hand, first and second implies a distinction of quality where in fact I intend no such distinction to be made. However I have found relying on the inherent value connotations of these terms, without wholeheartedly reproducing them, has proved very useful. The first discourse aims ‘high’ at overarching structures such as state and industrial bureaucracies, international capitalism, and mass politics. Although its practitioners do ask how these larger structures constitute and constrain individual action, this is not the primary question of the first discourse. Furthermore the first discourse takes place mostly in academia – that is between scholars employed by universities. The texts of the first discourse were primarily written by and for academics, even if in the hope that they might influence actions in the wider world. The authors of second discourse texts by

contrast were, while academically trained, often writing for the popular press.¹⁹ Their subjects – the work environment, entertainment, and politics – allowed for a focus on individual lives (even if treating these individuals as part of a group, as Kracauer does in *Die Angestellten*). The more targeted, individual focus of the second discourse was made possible by the broader purview of the first discourse. Kracauer’s depiction of the office politics of a Weimar-era firm speaks to Weber’s description of bureaucracy, even if Kracauer did not necessarily write with Weber in mind. Where the first discourse describes the modern bureaucratic order, the second discourse considers what it means to be a cog in the machine. As my concluding chapter shows, Critical Theory engages components of both discourses and lays a foundation for the reception of Arendt’s Eichmann and the Holocaust Debate.

Chapter One

Chapter One, “Max Weber and the Analysis of Rationalization,” outlines the role of Max Weber, the most famous diagnostician of rationalization, in establishing the first discourse.²⁰ In the first half of the chapter, “Weber and *Wissenschaft*,” I give a broad overview of the intellectual context in the Germany of Weber’s time (the late 19th to early 20th century). I aim to show how rationalization emerged as an essential subject for the new sciences of society, especially sociology. The primary texts discussed include Weber’s 1904 essay “The ‘Objectivity’ of Knowledge in Social Science and Social

¹⁹ *Die Angestellten* and *The Mass Ornament* are made up of Kracauer’s newspaper columns, or *feuilletons*. Many of Simmel’s writings first appeared in newspapers or popular journals. Interestingly, Weber once dismissed a lecture by his friend and colleague Werner Sombart as “ein *Feuilleton*.” “Editor’s Note” in Max Weber, “Remarks on Technology and Culture,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 22, no. 4 (2005): 24.

²⁰ Weber contributed to a diverse array of fields, lecturing and writing on the history and sociology of economics, religion, and the methodology of the social sciences. In “Science as a Vocation,” Weber described the disciplines closest to him: “sociology, history, economics, political science, and those types of [apolitical] cultural philosophy.” Weber, *From Max Weber*, 145.

Policy” and the 1913 essay “Some Categories of Interpretative Sociology.” In these methodological essays Weber outlines a theory of interpretive sociology by demonstrating how social scientists should interpret, or understand, social action. Weber explains: “We shall speak of ‘action’ [*Handeln*] insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning [*Sinn*] to his behavior.”²¹ Weber recognized that the sources of these meanings were changing; religion and other traditional affiliations were losing their power while instrumental, or technical, reason came to direct more and more actions – this was a process of rationalization. According to Weber, bureaucracy is rationalization’s greatest product. In the conclusion to this section I discuss Weber’s theory of bureaucratic power, especially as outlined in the massive *Economy and Society*, which was still incomplete at the time of his sudden death in 1920.²²

A specific discourse provides not just strictly defined labels or terms, but a terminology which derives its power through a targeted use of imagery and metaphor. The first discourse is an heir, not just of Weber’s methodological innovations, but of the striking language he used to describe the effects of rationalization. For while his collected works run into the thousands of pages, Weber is most often remembered for two powerfully dramatic turns of phrasing. The first, the “iron cage” (*Stahlhartes Gehäuse*) appears in 1905’s *The Protestant Ethic and the ‘Spirit’ of Capitalism*. The second comes from the late essay “Science as a Vocation,” (1917) which considers the consequences of modern capitalist driven rationalization, a process Weber argues results in the “disenchantment of the world” (*Entzauberung*). They remain compelling metaphors for

²¹ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff et al., 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 4. ; Max Weber, *Wirtschaft Und Gesellschaft : Grundriss Der Verstehenden Soziologie*, 5., rev. Aufl. ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1976), 1.

²² The German edition is nearly 1,000 pages, the English, which has much larger print, is over 1, 500.

describing the social and spiritual effects of a highly rationalized and bureaucratized modern world.

In the second half of Chapter One, “Weber and *Menschentum*,” I discuss the “iron cage” metaphor and Weber’s theory of disenchantment. While Weber recognized the benefits of bureaucracy and rationalization, he also indicated they posed a serious threat to individual autonomy. He described bureaucracy as “escape proof.” He understood the progress of rationalization as one that privileges means over ends, so that individuals may ask *how* they may perform a specific technical task, but not *why* any one task is preferable to another in the grand scheme of things. Weber’s take on these issues, which considers the individual experience of rationalization, under-gird the second discourse.

Chapter Two

Chapter Two is entitled “Georg Simmel and the Philosophy of Rationalization.” Along with Weber, with whom he was close, Simmel is considered a foundational figure in sociology.²³ While sharing key concerns with Weber, Simmel posed questions that focused on individual experience and helped begin social theory’s confrontation with mass culture. Where Weber hesitated to explore fully the consequences of rationalization at the individual level, Simmel asks what happens when rationalized objective culture expands to include all areas of life. As such he focuses not on states and large institutions, but on everyday social interactions, which as he explains in the 1895 essay “The Problem of Society,” produce the social “forms” that constitute “society.”

²³ Simmel was friendly with both Webers, he and Marianne exchanged letters about women’s liberation and gender issues. See Lieteke van Vucht Tijssen, “Women and Objective Culture: Georg Simmel and Marianne Weber,” in *Georg Simmel: Critical Assessments*, ed. David Frisby (New York: Routledge, 1994).

Simmel's massive *The Philosophy of Money*, first published in 1901, is not just an analysis of the transition from an economy based on bartering to one based on cash, but an inquiry into the way individuals themselves are transformed as weighing and calculating becomes a way of life. In Part I of this chapter, "Rationalization Inside and Out," I explain how Simmel's unique approach to the study of society yields a portrait of both large-scale social-economic changes, and the innumerable fleeting interactions percolating on the surface of daily life that actually produce "society." Simmel argues that individuals are both constrained and freed by the division of labor that under-girds the modern money economy – they are constrained by their narrow role in an increasingly complex production process, they are freed from traditional loyalties to employer and community as they float in the rapidly moving urban stream of money, people, and goods.

Weber tended to discuss the individual only in a general way; in his more colorful passages he approached but never really probed the issue of how the modernity he was analyzing might change the thinking and feeling horizons of individual social actors. As I discuss in the second part of the Simmel chapter, "The Individual: Simmel's 'Unity of Meaning,'" the individual figures much more prominently in Simmel's analysis of modernity, including areas such as fashion and entertainment, which fell out of Weber's more traditional purview. If in speaking of "demystification" Weber wondered what it means that the tram passenger has no idea how the train actually works, Simmel queried the significance of being pressed in tight with all those strangers. In his most famous essay, 1903's "The Metropolis and Mental Life," Simmel took his critique of rationalization to the ur-site of modernity, the city. Significantly, Simmel identified the

new possibilities offered by mass culture and the capitalist economy as an opportunity for building an identity outside of traditional parameters. Although modernity provides rich material for self-cultivation, it does not make the process easy. As Simmel explains in the 1911 essay “The Tragedy of Culture,” individuals are in constant danger of being overwhelmed by the growth and power of “objective” culture – the language, technology, and social norms that determine everyday existence but are impervious to the influence of any single individual. As such I see Simmel, who was actually born six years before Weber, as a mediating figure between the first and second discourses. Ultimately Simmel views modernity as a series of gains and losses, without judging it good or bad. Simmel focuses on the structural aspects of economic and social rationalization, and at the same time describes the balancing act between serving society through specialization (as the division of labor demands) and maintaining a sense of distinction and uniqueness – that is, of individuality.²⁴

Chapter Three

Simmel pointed the way to applying an analysis of modern rationalization to the developments of mass culture and of modern working individuals. In Chapter Three, “Siegfried Kracauer and the Rationalized World of *die Angestellten*,” I show how Simmel’s friend and former student, Siegfried Kracauer, developed this approach more fully in his Weimar era writings on mass culture, and an especially large segment of its consumers – *die Angestellten*. Kracauer wrote that Simmel had shown “The core of man’s

²⁴ Simmel was born in 1858, Weber in 1864.

essence is accessible through even the smallest side door.”²⁵ In his study of white-collar workers, Kracauer’s own ‘side door’ was the daily life of the office and the evenings spent in Berlin’s pleasure palaces. Eschewing grand theories and all-embracing interpretive frameworks in his 1929 study, *Die Angestellten*, Kracauer queried the modes of ‘everyday existence.’ He wrote:

We must rid ourselves of the delusion that it is major events which most determine a person. He is more deeply and lastingly influenced by the tiny catastrophes of which everyday existence is made up, and his fate is certainly linked predominantly to the sequence of these miniature occurrences.²⁶

Kracauer’s focus on the “miniature occurrences” that actually determine the fate of individuals typifies the approach of the second discourse. This discourse, populated by employees and bureaucrats – the ‘little men’ in the office and ‘cogs’ in the machinery of industry and states, in turn relies on the critique of rationalization and bureaucracy laid out in the first discourse.

Whereas Weber famously singled out those “specialists without spirit” who were most indicative of the devolution of the Protestant entrepreneur to an “Iron Cage” inhabitant, he also indicated that individuals at all levels of social and professional standing were subject to the new rationalized order. Kracauer goes to the heart of this new order in his 1929 study of low-level professionals, *Die Angestellten: Aus dem neuesten Deutschland*. As I detail in Part I of this chapter, “*Die Angestellten* at work,” Kracauer found white-collar employees who were typed, tested and overseen by teams of

²⁵ Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament : Weimer Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 237.

²⁶ ———, *The Salaried Masses : Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany* (London ; New York: Verso, 1998), 62. ; Kracauer, *Angestellten*, 56.

managers and experts from training, to hiring, to their daily life at the office. Employers enforced standard procedures and efficiency controls to deemphasize individual work style in favor of creating a rationalized, homogeneous workforce. Kracauer's description of individuals working in the face of increasing rationalization articulated the sense of personal powerlessness and invisibility associated with the increasing bureaucratization and categorization so predominant in the twentieth century. I argue *die Angestellten* were particularly suited for representing the problem of rationalization as it was rationalization that largely determined their lives in and outside the workplace and because they were also the least able to fight back.

In early twentieth century Germany there was a general consciousness of *die Angestellten* as a new, particularly modern, segment of the petty bourgeoisie. As the ranks of *die Angestellten* were expanding in size and professional, gender, and class diversity, they became the subjects of both scholarly criticism and popular culture. The subjects of the second discourse appear not just in scholarly texts, but equally often outside of the academy – including in newspapers, novels, and film. Such analysis might examine the exchange of love letters between two office clerks, as Kracauer does, imagine the insecurities of shakily employed department store clerk, as the novelist Hans Fallada does in *Kleiner Mann, Was Nun?*, or promote the fantasy of a young secretary marrying her male boss, as did many Weimar era films.

As I argue in Part II, “*Die Angestellten* at Play,” Kracauer's biggest innovation was his recognition of the relationship between the rationalized office and rationalized leisure (in many cases provided by the firms themselves in the form of sporting events and outdoor excursions). In both *Die Angestellten* and in other Weimar-era essays

collected in *The Mass Ornament*, Kracauer described employees' seduction by the "pleasure barracks" of Weimar Germany where a "cult of distraction" discouraged employees from reflecting on their precarious situation, and significantly, its causes. Here Kracauer presaged central aspects of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's analysis of the "culture industry" in their 1944 book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

In the Kracauer chapter's final section, "Revolt of the Middle Classes," I ask why the "little men" and "little shopgirls" of the white-collar world were alleged to be especially susceptible to the allure of mass culture, and later, fascism. In an age where traditional roles and support systems were undermined, civil servants at least had the status associated with their stable positions. Members of the working class enjoyed a sense of camaraderie, a powerful national party -- the German Social Democrats (SPD) -- dedicated to their interests, and a political ideology that guaranteed them a revolutionary place in history. White-collar workers on the other hand clung precariously to office or retail positions of dubious distinction while rejecting identification with the working class. The result was a group most subject to the volatilities of a rationalized office where they were as replaceable as wage laborers but with no class-based community to define or defend them. Defiantly distinct from the working class, but not quite bourgeois, *die Angestellten* were identified as the newest members of the "Middle Estate," or *Neue Mittelstand*. Despite this new label *die Angestellten* were problematic, especially for Marxist thinkers, because they did not fit proletarian or middle-class categories neatly. Given the embattled existence of the salaried employee, we can begin to see why contemporaries, and later, historians, saw *die Angestellten* as especially receptive to National Socialism.

Chapter Four

Concerns about the dangerous effects of a society ruled by rationalization and bureaucracy grew more acute following World War Two and the “industrialized” killing of the Holocaust. The whole project of modern civilization was called into question. In my final chapter, “Explaining Eichmann: Post-Holocaust Critiques of Rationalization,” I explore three responses to these issues, arguing that the texts under discussion represent the convergence of the first and second discourses on rationalization.

As I argue, Weimar-era studies of *die Angestellten* portended later analyses by practitioners of Critical Theory; the first section of Chapter Four, “*The Dialectic of Enlightenment*” explores one of the most influential of these analyses – that made by Horkheimer and Adorno. With a more direct but unorthodox relationship to Marx, Horkheimer and Adorno’s “Critical Theory” pushed Weber’s concerns and diagnosis in radical directions, continuing and expanding the first discourse on rationalization. At the same time, Critical Theory’s analysis of the connections between fascism, enlightenment, and mass culture continued the second discourse’s concentration on the effect of rationalization on daily life and the political implications that follow. In the analysis of Horkheimer and Adorno, the politically confused and powerless *Angestellter* comes to stand in for all citizens of what they argue has become a “total” society where the thinking individual has all but disappeared. In place of a populace capable of practicing critical reasoning (*Vernunft*), is a mass society of automatons who can only react along proscribed channels; fascism is but an extreme example of this general condition of modernity.

In *Eichmann* Arendt wrote “perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, and thus to dehumanize them.”²⁷ Arendt goes on to describe Eichmann as an unimaginative man from the lower middle classes, whose sole ambition was to participate in the “good society” by serving his social betters.²⁸ In the second section of Chapter Four, *Eichmann and Jerusalem*, I argue that a discursive connection exists between the model of the unreflective salaried worker portrayed by Kracauer and Hannah Arendt’s portrait of the Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann, exemplar of the “banality of evil.” Like the *Angestellten* portrayed by Kracauer, Arendt’s Eichmann is concerned only with his own social status and professional advancement. His focus does not extend to the ends of the tasks he performs, and even if it did, Arendt argues he does not have the mental capacity to reflect on his deeds or the goals of his superiors. Arendt’s Eichmann, like Horkheimer and Adorno’s mass citizen, has no capacity for self-reflection, and his self-interest is easily manipulated by his superiors who ‘rationally’ (in the sense of instrumental rationality) employ his actions for horrific ends.

The final section of Chapter Four, “*Modernity and the Holocaust*,” examines the debate over the degree to which the tenets and practices of the Enlightenment, and modernity more generally, are implicated in the Nazi-perpetrated genocide of World War Two. Some thinkers have seen Eichmann’s “banality” as a sign that all modern western societies, not just Nazi Germany, have the capacity for genocide. As Baumann argues in *Modernity*, the rationalized processes of technology and bureaucracy that the Nazis relied on to perpetuate the Holocaust are not essentially any different than the processes we rely

²⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Rev. and enl. ed., Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics. (New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Penguin Books, 1994), 289. My emphasis.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 31, 54, 126.

on to function in everyday, modern life. Bauman's critics include many historians and these historians have convincingly argued that situating the Holocaust in history weakens Bauman's devastating conclusions about modernity generally.

Although the infusion of historical specificity into the argument successfully challenges Bauman's broadest conclusions and tempers the pessimism of Horkheimer and Adorno, it does not necessarily lead to a happier conclusion about the past, present, and future of western civilization. Their critics have shown that Horkheimer and Adorno, Arendt, and Bauman granted rationalization -- an inanimate process -- agency, at the cost of ignoring its true engine, human individuals. Yet while humans make the machine, it is still true, and increasingly true in the new century, that a single individual can understand the workings of increasingly complex technologies and institutions less and can impact their functioning even less still. In *Eichmann*, Arendt writes that subject to the rule of ethical laws "all the cogs in the machinery, no matter how insignificant, are in court forthwith transformed back into perpetrators, that is to say into human beings."²⁹ What does it take to turn "cogs" back into human beings? Or better yet, keep humans from becoming cogs in the first place? Or is this question itself wrongheaded? In this dissertation, I will show how these questions, the subject of Chapter Four, were made possible because of the questions asked by the thinkers discussed in the first three chapters.

My Contribution

The thinkers and texts treated in this dissertation are not new to scholarly treatment. My innovation is to establish thematic relationships between a diverse set of

²⁹ Ibid., 289.

texts. My aim is to show that post-war debates about the Holocaust and modernity have deep roots in earlier analyses of rationalization made by German social theorists. That said, my perspective on these famous thinkers has naturally been informed by the work of others, and a few to a degree that merits mentioning here.

The literature on Weber alone is enormous. There are multiple claims on the great thinker from almost as many fields: economics, history, sociology, and political science, just to name the primary ones. In this dissertation I am making another claim: that Weber is not only a chronicler of the process of rationalization in the West, but is also a philosopher of that process, asking: “What does rationalization mean for life?” In treating Weber as a kind of ‘philosophical anthropologist’ I have been influenced by two books in particular, Wilhelm Hennis’s *Max Weber: Essays in Reconstruction*, and Laurence Scaff, *Fleeing the Iron Cage*.³⁰

Hennis believes that an over-emphasis on rationalization (beginning with Talcott Parsons and Fredrick Tenbruck) has led to a selective reading of Weber that ignores the real, driving question of his work.³¹ Hennis argues that instead of “decoding the universal-historical process of rationalization,” the “sole object” of Weber’s sociology is: “*Lebensführung* [‘way of life’]. Upon this, where men reveal their particular human qualities (*Menschentum*), *everything* turns.”³² Hennis is responding to what he views as the overly rigid traditional interpretation of Weber. He argues that “rationalization” is too

³⁰ I borrow the phrase “philosophical anthropologist” from Keith Tribe’s introduction to the Hennis book. Keith Tribe, “Translator’s Introduction,” in *Max Weber’s Central Question* (Newbury: Threshold, 2000), 15.

³¹ Parsons and Tenbruck were two of the earliest and most influential interpreters of Weber for the Anglophone world. Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (New York,: Free Press, 1968). Friedrich H. Tenbruck, “The Problem of Thematic Unity in the Works of Max Weber,” *British Journal of Sociology* 31, no. 3 (1980).

³² Wilhelm Hennis, *Max Weber : Essays in Reconstruction*, trans. Keith Tribe (London ; Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1988), 45, 44.

broad to be meaningful. While I think the term “rationalization” is still justified when describing one of the central themes of Weber’s oeuvre, I agree with Hennis that behind the “scientific” question: “how are states and institutions organized rationally?” lies the more philosophical question: “What kind of culture, and thus human being, does rationalization produce?”

Laurence Scaff identifies similar concerns, arguing Weber always has one eye “trained on what has become of our ‘conduct of life’ and our ‘fate.’”³³ Scaff argues that for Weber, “the central problem appears to be the same in every case: a sense that unified experience lies beyond the grasp of the modern self.”³⁴ The fragmentary nature of modern life is important for Scaff’s interpretation of Weber and explains why the author devotes a significant part of *Fleeing the Iron Cage* to Simmel, whom he calls “the most significant contemporary for Max Weber.”³⁵ Scaff identifies essential “shared interests and parallel questions” concerning “the maelstrom of essentially *cultural* problems associated with ‘modernity,’” including urbanization, the division of labor, and the decline of religion, in short: “the objective and subjective consequences of capitalism and the ‘peculiar rationalism’ of Western culture.”³⁶

It is precisely the productive struggle between “the objective and subjective” developments of modern rationalization that Simmel articulates so powerfully. Donald N. Levine has been important for my reading of Simmel. In particular, I appreciate his elucidation of the “tension between the leveling effects of modernity and its liberating

³³ Lawrence A. Scaff, *Fleeing the Iron Cage : Culture, Politics, and Modernity in the Thought of Max Weber* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 127. I also found Jim Faught’s article on shared concerns between Weber and Simmel extremely useful. See Faught, “Neglected Affinities: Max Weber and Georg Simmel.”

³⁶ Scaff, *Fleeing the Iron Cage*, 123.

consequences for individual subjectivity” in Simmel’s work.³⁷ Levine has also argued convincingly that the underlying coherence behind Simmel’s many publications lays in “the search for form – whether of the personality, of social interaction, or cultural domain.”³⁸ Guy Oakes’s long introduction to his translation of selected Simmel texts, which explains the importance of forms for Simmel’s thought, was also very useful to me. Oakes convincingly argues “the concept of form” is “Simmel’s fundamental methodological instrument.”³⁹ Forms are essential to Simmel’s theory of cultural production wherein all individuals are contributors. Simmel was also a pioneer of urban theory, recognizing the city, and specifically Berlin, as a laboratory of modernity.

Kracauer also treated Berlin as a “lab,” in his case, of employee culture. The first place I encountered a comparison of Simmel’s and Kracauer’s analysis of modernity was in David Frisby’s important book, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the work of Simmel, Kracauer, and Benjamin*.⁴⁰ When *Fragments* came out in 1986, the German philosopher and literary theorist Walter Benjamin was gaining a level of recognition much greater than he had known during his lifetime (he died in 1940). In the last decades, Kracauer and Simmel have gone a way towards ‘catching up’ with Benjamin – they are the subjects of an increasing number of scholarly essays and books,

³⁷ Donald N. Levine, "Simmel Reappraised: Old Images, New Scholarship," in *Reclaiming the Sociological Classics: The State of the Scholarship*, ed. Charles Camic (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 177. Levine points out that this theme came from Simmel’s reading of Nietzsche. See Klaus Lichtblau, "Der 'Pathos Der Distanz'. Preliminarien Zur Nietzsche -- Rezeption Bei Georg Simmel," in *Georg Simmel Und Die Moderne*, ed. H.J. and O. Rammstedt Dahme (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984).

³⁸ Levine, "Simmel Reappraised: Old Images, New Scholarship," 201. For more from Levine see: Donald N. Levine, "Sociology's Quest for the Classics: The Case of Simmel," in *The Future of the Sociological Classics*, ed. Budford Rhea (London: Alen & Unwin, 1981). Donald N. Levine, *The Flight from Ambiguity: Essays in Social and Cultural Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985). Donald N. Levine, *Visions of the Sociological Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

³⁹ Guy Oakes, "Introduction," in *Essays on Interpretation in Social Science*, ed. Guy Oakes (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980), 8.

⁴⁰ David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986).

their complete works are being compiled, and more and more of their writing is being translated. As David L. Gross said of Benjamin, Kracauer and Simmel also excelled at “deciphering quotidian objects” to find in “the apparently ephemeral minutiae of ordinary existence that the unspoken truth of the whole.”⁴¹ It is their attention to daily life that places Simmel and Kracauer in the second discourse, while their attention to the “truth of the whole” fate of rationalized society speaks to the first discourse.

Inka Mülder-Bach’s analysis of how Kracauer’s “surface investigations” of the everyday act as a kind of critical phenomenology has helped shape my approach to his writings.⁴² She has also argued convincingly that Kracauer anticipated key points of Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis of instrumental rationalization, or what Kracauer calls “ratio.”⁴³ Horkheimer and Adorno themselves, along with Arendt, have been the subjects of volumes of criticism. Many of the sources that have been most helpful in my own assessment of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, including Bauman and several historians of the Holocaust, are discussed in Chapter Four.

In this dissertation, I offer a new perspective on these familiar works by exploring the diverse threads they spin around the problem of rationalization, a process central to understanding the European twentieth century. The Weber scholar Keith Tribe said of his subject:

Weber’s work was not characterized by the presence of a specific field of material proper to one particular academic discipline and which thereby lent it coherence;

⁴¹ David L. Gross, “Kultur and Its Discontents: The Origins of A “Critique of Everyday Life” In Germany, 1880-1925,” in *Essays on Culture and Society in Modern Germany*, ed. David B. King, Gary D. Stark, and Bede K. Lackner (College Station: Published for the University of Texas at Arlington by Texas A&M University Press, 1982), 95.

⁴² See Inka Mülder-Bach, *Siegfried Kracauer : Grenzgänger Zwischen Theorie Und Literatur : Seine Frühen Schriften 1913-1933* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1985).

⁴³ ———, “Introduction,” in *The Salaried Masses* (London ; New York: Verso, 1998), 12.

we rather encounter in this writings a set of questions, which remain a constant through the most diverse material.⁴⁴

In a similar spirit, this dissertation examines a common set of questions through a diverse set of texts. Whether the problem of rationalization is traced historically and large-scale, as by Weber and Horkheimer and Adorno, or at the level of everyday life as by Simmel and Kracauer, the first and second discourses stem from similar concerns, even as they approach the problem of rationalization differently.

⁴⁴ Tribe, "Translator's Introduction," 13-14.

Chapter One

Max Weber and the Analysis of Rationalization

I. *Weber and Wissenschaft*

Weber and the Social Sciences in Germany

Buried deep in the second volume of Max Weber's *Economy and Society*, the massive and complicated book left unfinished at the time of his death, is a single paragraph on the topic of "bureaucratic domination" rich with the themes of the author's life-long task: the analysis of rationality and its growth – rationalization.⁴⁵ In it Weber writes:

Once fully established, bureaucracy is among those social structures [*Gebilden*] which are the hardest to destroy. Bureaucracy is *the* means of transforming social action into rationally organized action. Therefore, as an instrument of rationally organizing authority relations, bureaucracy was and is a power instrument of the first order for one who controls the bureaucratic apparatus.⁴⁶

The drive of bureaucratic rationalization in Western society is so powerfully persistent that, as Weber argued in an earlier book, it eventually forms a "*stahlhartes Gehäuse*" (shell as hard as steel), or in the most famous English rendering, an "iron cage."⁴⁷ In

⁴⁵ For the importance of rationality and rationalization in Weber's work, see especially Rogers Brubaker, *The Limits of Rationality: An Essay on the Social and Moral Thought of Max Weber* (London; Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1984). Also see Tenbruck, "The Problem of Thematic Unity in the Works of Max Weber."

⁴⁶ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 987. Hereafter *Economy and Society*. ; Weber, *Wirtschaft*, 569-70. Hereafter *Wirtschaft*.

⁴⁷ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and The "Spirit" Of Capitalism and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 121. Edited, translated, and with an introduction by Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells. Hereafter *Ethic*. ; Max Weber, *Die Protestantische Ethik Und Der "Geist" Des Kapitalismus: Textausgabe Auf Der Grundlage Der Ersten Fassung Von 1904/05* (Weinheim Beltz Athenäum Verlag 1993), 153. Hereafter *Ethik*.

Economy and Society, Weber echoes his earlier conclusion, arguing that not only is “collective behavior” ineffective in the face of organized “authority relations,” but that even the individual bureaucrat himself “cannot squirm out of the apparatus into which he has been harnessed.”⁴⁸ In the past the role of administrators performed “administrative tasks as a honorific duty,” today “the professional bureaucrat is chained to his activity in his entire economic and ideological existence.” The individual bureaucrat performs a specialized task within the organization – “a ceaselessly moving mechanism” – that the individual can neither start nor stop. He is “only a small cog [*Gleid*]” and his status as a necessary function is dependent on “the perpetuation of the apparatus and the persistence of its rationally organized domination.”⁴⁹

However it is not only those employed as bureaucrats who rely on the new bureaucratic order, but all those living in modern industrialized societies. Weber continues: “Increasingly, all order in public and private organization is dependent on the system of files and the discipline of officialdom.” While those hostile to the system may successfully destroy the files, “the settled orientation of *man* for observing the accustomed rules and regulations will survive independently of the documents.” Such orientation is “bred both in the officials and in the subjects.” Any permanent reorganization of the system causes “the disturbed mechanism to ‘snap into gear’ again.” The “‘impersonal’ character” of “the mechanism” means that a bureaucratically organized firm, military, or state, can function without interruption during changes in leadership. Such an “apparatus” is nearly impervious to “entirely new formations of authority,” since new authority must assert itself with the existing means of technology,

⁴⁸ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 988-89. ; Weber, *Wirtschaft*, 570-71.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 988. ; *Ibid.*, 570.

communication, and other logistics. For this reason modern revolutions are no longer from “below” but most often take the form of a *coup d’etat*.⁵⁰

Weber is not arguing for a revolution, a return to a pre-industrial order, or for acquiescence to bureaucratic rule. He understands bureaucratic rationality to be a necessary and beneficial part of the modern world. He is committed to an objective, or “value-free,” analysis of rationalization. Yet Weber’s theory of rationality is “relentlessly paradoxical.”⁵¹ This difficulty is due not only to the different kinds of rationality Weber identifies, but, as he indicates in the above passage, because he believes rationalization not only changes behavior, but the “settled orientation of *man*.” Here, in Weber’s treatment of rationality – the theme that “links his empirical and methodological investigations with his political and moral reflections”⁵² – are the seeds of both the first and second discourses on rationalization.

The first discourse describes the process of turning “social action” into “rationally organized action.” By the beginning of the twentieth century, more and more areas of society were regulated by large impersonal institutions. Economic transactions were more often with strangers than neighbors. Employers and employees were bound by business contracts, not communal and mutual obligations. Traditional ways of social bonding and meaning giving, such as religion, were pushed to the margins of an increasingly secular and rationalized public sphere. Inside the bureaucratic apparatus individuals were reduced to mere “cogs,” functions within a system, rather than agents with the power to influence its operation. This state of affairs applied not just to bureaucrats but everyone dependent on “public and private organization,” as such organization had become

⁵⁰ Ibid., 988-89. ; Ibid., 570-571.

⁵¹ Callinicos, *Social Theory*, 178.

⁵² Brubaker, *Limits of Rationality*, 1.

indispensable and virtually indestructible. The second discourse looks at the impact of rationalization on the daily life of the individual. Although he is primarily located in the first discourse, Weber also addresses second discourse issues, as when he argues that the bureaucrat's entire "economic and ideological existence" is shaped by his work, and that all "officials and subjects" are "bred" to observe the new rationalized order.

I begin this chapter with a brief overview of the intellectual context in Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I aim to demonstrate Weber's place in this context and to show how questions about the new disciplines of the cultural sciences intersected with the critique of rationalization. In so doing I am setting up the themes and questions of the first discourse where rationalization emerged as a central question about western modernity and the fate of enlightenment. Weber's theory of sociology centered on what he called "social action." He asked how the transition of societies from earlier modes of organization to modern ones constrained, enabled, or privileged certain kinds of social action. Modern developments, most notably the growth of capitalism and bureaucracy, encourage actions that are "instrumentally rational" (*zweckrational*), which Weber defined as action whereby the actor calculates the most rational, or efficient, means to pursue a given end without concern for the moral or ethical ramifications of his action.⁵³ Weber famously categorized four different kinds of action (including instrumentally rational), but in a more philosophical mode, he also asked of future generations "how will they *be*?" – that is not just how they will behave, but how they will exist.⁵⁴ For Weber, rationalization's "most tangible manifestation" is bureaucracy.⁵⁵ I

⁵³ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 24. ; *Wirtschaft*, 12.

⁵⁴ "The National State and Economic Policy" (1895 Freiburg address) in Max Weber, *Essays in Economic Sociology*, ed. Richard Swedberg (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 129. ; Original

conclude part one of this chapter with an analysis of Weber's foundational theory of bureaucracy and its implications for human existence. In the second half of this chapter I untangle two of the most powerful and enduring images from Weber's critique of rationalization – the "iron cage" metaphor from *The Protestant Ethic* (1904) and the theory of "disenchantment" from "Science as a Vocation" (1917).

Weber's lifetime spanned fundamental political and social changes in Germany while his academic career encompassed the emergence of new disciplines, including sociology.⁵⁶ Born in Erfurt in 1864 and raised in Berlin, Weber was the son of Max Weber Sr., a prominent National Liberal member of the German Reichstag and Prussian Landtag.⁵⁷ He studied law at the universities of Heidelberg, Berlin, and Göttingen. After a brief stint as a practicing lawyer, Weber became professor of economics at Freiburg in 1894. In 1896 he moved to Heidelberg to take a position in political science. In 1897 Weber suffered a debilitating mental collapse, which halted his writing and teaching during the following years. He resigned his chair in 1903 but began working again in 1904 when he took over, with Edgar Jaffé and Werner Sombart, the editorship of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*. He resumed teaching economics at the University of Munich in 1919 until his sudden death at age 56 in June of 1920.

available in: Max Weber, *Gesammelte Politische Schriften*, 5. Aufl. ed., Utb Politikwissenschaft. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1988).

⁵⁵ H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890-1930* (New York: Knopf, 1958), 289.

⁵⁶ Although Weber arrived at sociology late, his early studies of political economy have a "sociological flavor," Richard Swedberg, *The Max Weber Dictionary: Key Words and Central Concepts* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Social Sciences, 2005), 256. See also Lawrence A. Scaff, "Weber before Weberian Sociology," in *Reading Weber*, ed. Keith Tribe (London ; New York: Routledge, 1989).

⁵⁷ Until recently the most comprehensive account of Weber's life and work had been the biography by his wife, Marianne. Marianne Weber, *Max Weber : A Biography* (New York: Wiley, 1975). In 2005 the German historian Joachim Radkau published the comprehensive *Max Weber* where he makes use of previously unavailable sources, especially letters, and emphasizes Weber's inner life and personal history. Radkau's book was recently translated into English. Joachim Radkau, *Max Weber : A Biography*, English ed. (Cambridge, U.K. ; Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2009).

When Weber was born, Bismarck had just begun the series of wars that would culminate in German unification in 1871. Over the course of Weber's lifetime the German Empire expanded at home and abroad, growth that was made possible by a large and powerful Prussian bureaucracy. He witnessed Bismarck's fall and the reign of Wilhelm II, the First World War, and the failed socialist revolutions that followed. Weber was a participant in the founding of the first German Republic during the winter of 1919-1920.⁵⁸

The political and intellectual context of Germany influenced Weber's search for a methodology appropriate to the social sciences, which in turn provides an important background for examining his critique of rationalization and bureaucracy. In the early twentieth century, Weber, along with social theorists such as Wilhelm Dilthey, Wilhelm Windelbrand, and Heinrich Rickert, began to stake out territory for the cultural sciences, of which, Weber explained, the social sciences were a part.⁵⁹ Their first task was to demonstrate how the cultural sciences were different in method, aims, and results than the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*). Many of these thinkers (since dubbed "Neo-Kantians") turned to Kant's distinction "between the worlds of external nature and human culture" to build their case that the study of culture required a different approach, one not dependent on empirical observation alone."⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Weber helped draft the Weimar constitution and considered running for office.

⁵⁹ "If we call 'cultural sciences' those disciplines that view the events of human life from the viewpoint of their *cultural significance*, then social science in our sense belongs to the category." Max Weber, "The 'Objectivity' of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy," in *The Essential Weber: A Reader*, ed. Sam Whimster (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004), 371. Hereafter "Objectivity." ; Max Weber, "Die 'Objektivität' Sozialwissenschaftlicher Und Sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze Zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen: Verlag von J.C.B. Mohr 1922), 165. ; Hereafter "Objektivität."

⁶⁰ Callinicos, *Social Theory*, 153. In his important book on Neo-Kantians, Thomas Willey explains the Neo-Kantians shared an imperative to, like Kant: "criticize and examine the foundations of knowledge itself, and the superior claim of practical over theoretical reason." This conception can be traced back to what Kant saw as his revolutionary intervention into eighteenth century philosophy, his demonstration that

In 1904 Weber joined the editorial board of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft*, which would become “the leading social science journal in Germany.”⁶¹ For the first issue Weber laid out the *Archiv*’s position on social scientific methodology in a piece now known as the “Objectivity Essay.” Weber writes: “We have defined as ‘cultural sciences’ [*Kulturwissenschaften*] those disciplines that seek to identify the cultural *significance* of life’s phenomena.” He continues:

The *significance* inherent in the formation of a cultural phenomenon and the *bases* for this significance cannot be taken founded and rendered intelligible from a system of law-like concepts, no matter how complete, for the significance of cultural phenomena implies a relationship to *evaluative ideas* (*Wertideen*). The concept of culture is an *evaluative concept*.⁶²

“*Wertideen*” are ideas based on values held by a particular culture, which give the ideas their significance.⁶³ Cultural values require not just empirical observation, but interpretation on the part of the social scientist. The need for this kind of interpretation is what distinguishes the social sciences from the *Naturwissenschaften*, as the latter deal not in contextual, but general and universal “law-like concepts.” Weber gives an example:

knowledge is a construction. It follows then that anything contingent on categories of human understanding cannot be contained by the categories of natural sciences. Neo-Kantians used “Kant’s distinction . . . between the worlds of external nature and human culture” to build their case that the study of culture required a different approach, one not dependent on empirical observation alone. Thomas E. Willey, *Back to Kant : The Revival of Kantianism in German Social and Historical Thought, 1860-1914* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978).

⁶¹ Swedberg, *The Max Weber Dictionary*, 8. See also Regis A. Factor, *Guide to the Archiv Für Sozialwissenschaft Und Sozialpolitik Group, 1904-1933 : A History and Comprehensive Bibliography* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988).

⁶² Weber, "Objectivity," 377. ; “Objektivität,” 175.

⁶³ Swedberg, *The Max Weber Dictionary*, 287. Swedberg translates “*Wertideen*” as “value-ideas.”

“While in astronomy we are interested in the heavenly bodies only with respect to *quantitative* relationships susceptible to exact measurement, it is the *qualitative* aspect of events that interest us in social science.”⁶⁴

Proponents of cultural sciences shared the conviction that areas not covered by natural science, such as economics, history, and culture, could also be pursued scientifically.⁶⁵ However, they appreciated that their projects would entail problems that natural scientists did not encounter and that methodology was the site where these problems must be approached.⁶⁶ The tools of natural science (chiefly empirical observation) were inadequate for history and other cultural sciences. The task of cultural scientists, and of historians specifically, was to select objects of study from an unruly flow of events and personalities -- in short, to bring order to the past in a manner meaningful to the present.⁶⁷ Cultural phenomena derive their significance not from simply *being* but from *meaning*.⁶⁸ Such meaning is not explainable by an appeal to

⁶⁴ Weber, "Objectivity," 375. ; "Objektivität," 173.

⁶⁵ *Geistwissenschaften* pioneer Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) considered the fundamental distinguisher of the cultural sciences to be their subject matter, which could be “understood by fellow humans in ways nonhuman phenomena could not.” See Levine, *Visions*, 199. By contrast the Neo-Kantians, and Wilhelm Windelband in particular, located the source of difference in method rather than content. See W. Windelband, *Präludien : Aufsätze Und Reden Zur Einleitung in Die Philosophie*, 3. verm. Aufl. ed. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (P. Siebeck), 1907).

⁶⁶ Willey, *Back to Kant*, 138.

⁶⁷ Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History : The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present*, Rev. ed. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), 153.

⁶⁸ In his 1902 book, *The Limits of Concept Formation in the Natural Science*, Heinrich Rickert argued that the selection and treatment of subject matter in the cultural sciences relied on the evaluation of values specific to the cultural object (*Kulturobjekte*) under investigation. For Rickert’s relationship to Weber, see Guy Oakes, *Weber and Rickert : Concept Formation in the Cultural Sciences* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988). Also see Guy Oakes, "Weber and the Southwest German School: The Genesis of the Concept of the Historical Individual," in *Max Weber and His Contemporaries*, ed. Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Jürgen Osterhammel (London ; Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987).

general laws or an “objective process of history,” but by placing it in the context of cultural values.⁶⁹ Weber argues that while the scientist must take value into account, he should not be tempted to assign or judge specific cultural values good or bad, or superior or inferior to other values. The social scientist must practice “value-freedom” (*Wertfreiheit*) – that is, not judge the value of a particular culture, but interpret what, and how, a given culture values. As Weber explains: “The transcendental presupposition of any *cultural science* is *not* that we find one or any ‘culture’ to be *of value*, but that we are cultural *beings* endowed with the capacity and desire to adopt a position with respect to the world, and lend it *meaning*.”⁷⁰ The scientist’s task is not to “adopt a position” himself, but to interpret how his subjects have “selected” meaning “from the meaningless infinity of world events.”⁷¹ The social scientist recognizes that meanings are not inherent in any time or place, but contextual and temporal human productions. This insight would eventually culminate in Weber’s conviction that while the power of science has demystified the world, it cannot in turn re-enchant it.

Weber’s theory of “disenchantment” (discussed in Part II below), was part of a general “crisis of meaning” in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. This crisis was particularly acute in the German Historical School.⁷² Georg Iggers describes the historicist outlook: “The core of [which] . . . lies in the assumption that there is a fundamental difference between the phenomena of nature and those of history.”⁷³ The writing of history was an altogether different task than describing the natural world, the

⁶⁹ Iggers, *The German Conception of History*, 154. See also R. Lanier Anderson, “The Debate over the *Geisteswissenschaften* in German Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy, 1870-1945*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 228.

⁷⁰ Weber, “Objectivity,” 380-81. ; “Objektivität,” 180.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 380. ; *Ibid.*, 180.

⁷² The Historical School was institutionally dominant in Germany from the early nineteenth century until the middle of the twentieth. See Iggers, *The German Conception of History*.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 5.

laws of which were immune to the changing fortunes of humans.⁷⁴ History alone could describe the development and diversity of human societies, politics, and culture.

If, in the tradition of enlightenment, Kant had extolled “universal standards of morality and justice,” historians by contrast, “espoused cultural relativism.”⁷⁵ German historicists rejected the natural law traditions of Western Europe and in place of the ‘transcendent rights of man,’ they saw every nation as historically unique.⁷⁶ They treated “ideas and values not in terms of absolute norms of truth or good, but as expression of a specific age, culture, or people.”⁷⁷ Such a stance implies that values are historical and culturally bound – in other words, existential and relative, rather than universal and transcendent.⁷⁸ This conclusion created a problem: the recognition that all values are relative undermined any claim to universal truth.⁷⁹

Weber, a self-professed “student” of the Historical School, warns that while the social scientist works to uncover qualitative cultural meaning, or value, he must not mistake his work as revealing or providing meaning as such. Modern science, be it cultural or natural, asks the question “how,” but not “why.” The sciences provide:

⁷⁴ The static nature of the natural world was challenged by the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* in 1859.

⁷⁵ Levine, *Visions*, 184.

⁷⁶ Iggers, *The German Conception of History*, 5.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 127. The emphasis on culture and history constitutes what Woodruff Smith identifies as a cultural science German “*Sonderweg*.” Woodruff D. Smith, *Politics and the Sciences of Culture in Germany, 1840-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 238-39.

⁷⁸ This is not to say however, that historicists supported moral or cultural relativism. Rather they believed, “all cultural phenomena are emanations of divine will and represent true values,” Iggers, *The German Conception of History*, 8.

⁷⁹ Willey offers a useful summary of the “fundamental question of Neo-Kantianism” in relation to this crisis: “How to find appropriate but distinct methodologies for the physical and human sciences, how to overcome the relativistic implications of historicism, and how to establish human autonomy against the claims of scientific determinism,” Willey, *Back to Kant*, 23.

“‘existential knowledge’, knowledge of what ‘is,’” but not “‘normative knowledge’, i.e. knowledge of what ‘should be.’”⁸⁰ (Another way of saying “how” not “why” is that means can be evaluated, but not ends). As such Weber warns: “an empirical science cannot teach anyone what he *should* do, only what he *can* do.”⁸¹

The Rationalization of Action

During his lifetime Weber contributed to several of the social sciences – economics, political science, history, and eventually, sociology.⁸² In “Objectivity,” Weber made the case that the role of the social sciences is to provide interpretation of culturally produced meanings. In the same vein, Weber argued that the task of the sociologist was to interpret the subjective meaning behind social actions. In the 1913 essay “Some Categories of Interpretive Sociology,” Weber outlined his methodology for “interpretive sociology” (*verstehende Soziologie*), something he would do again in the opening chapter of *Economy and Society*.⁸³

Weber explains that interpretive sociology takes “the single individual and his action as its basic unit, as its ‘atom.’”⁸⁴ Interpretive sociology seeks not only to describe the behavior of individuals, but also to understand the meanings they themselves ascribe

⁸⁰ Weber, "Objectivity," 360. ; “Objektivität,” 148.

⁸¹ Ibid., 362. ; Ibid., 151.

⁸² The discipline of sociology was not a major concern for Weber until he was in his forties.

⁸³ For the differences between the two essays see Edith Graber’s “Translator’s Introduction” to “Categories.” Weber, "Categories."

⁸⁴ Ibid.: 158. Hereafter “Categories.” ; Max Weber, "Über Einige Kategorien Der Verstehenden Soziologie," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze Zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen: Verlag von J.C.B Mohr 1922), 263. Hereafter “Kategorien.”

to their actions.⁸⁵ In *Economy and Society*, Weber writes that sociology is “a science which is concerned with the subjective meaning of [social] action.”⁸⁶

In *Economy and Society* Weber lists the four different ways individual social action can be oriented: *traditionally* or habitually (that is, according to custom); *affectually* (emotionally); *Value-rational* (adhering to religious, or ethical-cultural values) or *instrumentally rational*. Weber describes instrumentally rational action:

This type [self-interested action], with its clarity of self-consciousness and freedom from subjective scruples, is the polar anti-thesis of every sort of unthinking acquiescence in customary ways as well as of devotion to norms consciously accepted as absolute values. One of the most important aspects of the process of ‘rationalization’ of action is the substitution for the unthinking acceptance of ancient custom, of deliberate adaptation to situations in terms of self-interest.⁸⁷

Instrumentally rational action is calculated to achieve the desired goal without regard for tradition (“customary ways”) or ethics (“absolute values”).⁸⁸ In Weber’s description, instrumentally rational action replaces the “unthinking” action of habit and custom. It is “enlightened” in the sense that it is free of superstition. Yet, as discussed in Chapter Four, in the post-Weberian discourses, it is instrumental rationality that becomes unthinking and automatic as enlightenment reverts back into myth. In this scenario instrumental rationality blinkers the ability of actors to reflect on and assign value to their actions, or to question not only if the means justify the ends, but also if the ends themselves are just.

⁸⁵ Weber, "Categories," 152. ; "Kategorien," 255.

⁸⁶ ———, *Economy and Society*, 9. ; *Wirtschaft*, 4.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 30. ; *Ibid.*, 15

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 24. ; *Ibid.*, 12.

Weber never offers an unambiguously damning critique of rationalization, as Horkheimer, Adorno, and Bauman do. However, he does use emotionally charged language to describe a bureaucratically organized society. He indicates that, under the conditions of modernity, the principles of instrumental rationality dominate not just institutions, but individuals too.

For example, Weber concludes “Categories” by explaining the “practical meaning of rationalization of the rules of a social group.” Office employees, and even their supervisor, “‘know’ the rules of accounting,” but only in the way we know how to multiply – “for us to “correctly” use the multiplication table, it is not necessary that we have rational insight into the algebraic theorems that underlie [it].” Rather, it is “imposed on us as children exactly as a rational directive of a despot is imposed on a subject.” An increasingly rationalized world demands calculative instrumentally rational action from its members.

While technology and science bring many improvements they at the same time require many leaps of faith, or more to the point – obedience. Instead of learning “through rational deliberations” we grow adept at calculating “in what consensus terms the ‘correct’ way.” From streetcars, to elevators, to guns, “No ordinary consumer today has even proximate knowledge about the production techniques of the goods he uses daily.” The best example of an act of modern faith is the monetary system. Echoing Simmel, Weber writes: “The money user does not know how money actually acquires its remarkable singular qualities, for even the specialists argue strenuously about that.”⁸⁹ The consumer does not need to know why money works the way it does, but just needs to follow the rules of the money economy.

⁸⁹ ———, “Categories,” 177-78. ; “Kategorien,” 292.

Weber continues:

Rationalization of social actions, therefore, certainly does not produce a universal knowledge of their conditions and relationships, but rather usually brings about precisely the opposite. The “primitive” knows infinitely more of the economic and social conditions of his own existence than the person usually called “civilized” knows of his. [. . .] One has the confidence that, in principle at least, one can ‘count’ on these conditions, “*calculate*” their behavior, and orient one’s own action toward unambiguous expectations engendered by them. And here lies the specific interest of the rational capitalistic ‘enterprise’ in rational rules, whose practical functioning can be taken into account in the enterprise’s probabilities just as can that of a machine.⁹⁰

Increasing rationalization is the historical context for interpreting actions made by “civilized” individuals who must acquire the ability to manipulate rationally their environment as a “machine.” In his critical history of the rise of rationalized bureaucratic orders, Weber reveals how narrowly focused calculation becomes an essential technique for negotiating modern life. Enterprises – private, public, and political – increasingly function like complex machines – actors are trained in how to manipulate them but they have no view of the total process and generally do not reflect on the reason for the process in the first place.

⁹⁰ Ibid.: 178-79. ; “Kategorien,” 293-294. In this passage, particularly the point about the “primitive” having greater practical knowledge of his world than modern man has of his, Weber foreshadows his theory of “disenchantment,” which appears almost a decade later in the essay “The Vocation of Science.” “Categories” also contains Weber’s first mention of the “*Entzauberung der Welt*,” here translated as “a world increasingly divested of magic.” Ibid., 155 ; Ibid., 258. For more on the history of the term see Swedberg, *The Max Weber Dictionary*, 62-63.

Bureaucracy

Bureaucracy is the best way to organize large amounts of information, products, and people.⁹¹ Bureaucracy is as ancient as civilization but is most fully realized in the modern age, and as Weber sees it, nowhere more so than in Germany: “surpassing all of them [other European countries], the Germans perfected the rational, functional and specialized bureaucratic organization of all forms of domination from factory to army and public administration.”⁹² As David Beetham explains, in Imperial Germany, the bureaucrats who effectively ran the government “were responsible to the Kaiser rather than to parliament.” Given the “personal limitations of the Kaiser” and the lack of “parliamentary accountability,” there existed a system “not merely of bureaucratic administration, but of bureaucratic *rule*.”⁹³ In her account of the German civil service, Jane Caplan notes that commentators have long seen Germany as distinct among its European neighbors for being a thoroughly “administered” nation, and argues that “for Prussia, and subsequently for Germany, the bureaucratic state has had the character of a defining national institution.” Germany, is not only, as Otto Hintze called it, “the classical land of civil service;” Caplan argues it is also “the classical land of scholarship about this institution.”⁹⁴

⁹¹ David Beetham opens his book on bureaucracy by highlighting this ambiguous duality: “Bureaucracy is something we all love to hate. It presents simultaneously the contradictory images of bungling inefficiency and threatening power.” David Beetham, *Bureaucracy*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 1.

⁹² “Just as the Italians and after them the English masterly developed the modern capitalist forms of economic organization, so the Byzantines, French revolutionary centralization and finally, surpassing all of them, *the Germans perfected the rational, functional and specialized bureaucratic organization of all forms of domination* from factory to army and public administration.” Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1400. My emphasis. ; *Wirtschaft*, 834

⁹³ Beetham, *Bureaucracy*, 60.

⁹⁴ Jane Caplan, *Government without Administration : State and Civil Service in Weimar and Nazi Germany* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1988), 2.

However a strong bureaucracy is not just the characteristic of a power state such as the Kaiserreich, but of all large modern institutions, ecclesiastical, cultural, and economic.⁹⁵ Initially bureaucracy was associated with absolutist governments that controlled all major institutions, such as financial markets, education, and the military. The rise of capitalism challenged strong state control but capitalist enterprises themselves grew so large that they too needed to be rationalized and produced a managerial class – that is people who are not themselves producers, but manage the processes of production.⁹⁶

In *Economy and Society*, Weber describes “modern officialism” (*Beamtentum*) as characterized by a fixed system of rules, a clear hierarchy and reliance on written documents.⁹⁷ Weber shows how fully developed modern bureaucracy, owing to its technical superiority, gains power over traditional forms of organization and authority. Bureaucracy grows increasingly autonomous, surviving the fall of individual leaders and politicians.

Ironically, the enterprising spirit which helps drive the expansion of capitalism promotes corporate bureaucracy, which in turns constrains entrepreneurship as innovation becomes standardization.⁹⁸ As Henry Jacoby explains, personal initiative and even the demonstration of personality, are a hindrance to the operation of an “objective” enterprise. Personnel should identify “with the organization they feel they embody.” Advancement in bureaucratic organizations goes to those who best mirror the image of

⁹⁵ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 956. ; *Wirtschaft*, 551. Beetham, *Bureaucracy*, 3.

⁹⁶ See Henry Jacoby, *The Bureaucratization of the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

⁹⁷ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 956-57. ; *Wirtschaft*, 551-556.

⁹⁸ Beetham, *Bureaucracy*, 54. The “calculability” engendered by the money economy is an essential theme in the work of Georg Simmel, discussed in the next chapter.

their superiors, -- that is advancement is “related to the constant adjustment to the methodology of the existing system, as well as to the prevailing philosophy.”⁹⁹

Weber consistently emphasizes bureaucracy’s relentless depersonalization, which divorces “official activity” from “the sphere of private life.”¹⁰⁰ The holding of a bureaucratic office is a “vocation” (*Beruf*) and unlike feudal vassalage, “modern loyalty to an office . . . does not establish a relationship to a *person*.”¹⁰¹ Thus follows, “The ‘objective’ discharge of business . . . according to *calculable rules* and ‘without regard for person.’” According to Weber, the demand for “calculability” (*Berechenbarkeit*) constitutes the very “peculiarity of modern culture.”¹⁰² Weber’s language grows increasingly dramatic as he continues: “Bureaucracy develops the more perfectly, the more it is ‘dehumanized’ [*entmenschlicht*] the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation.”¹⁰³

The rise of bureaucratic rule brings other significant changes, including how social status is determined both inside and outside officialdom. Weber writes “Consistent bureaucratic domination means the leveling of ‘status honor.’”¹⁰⁴ This process does not mean social status becomes unimportant, but that it flows instead from an official’s position in a bureaucratic organization, rather than (as in former times) personal actions or familial history. The weakening of traditional status is also helped by the capitalist

⁹⁹ Jacoby, *The Bureaucratization of the World*, 81.

¹⁰⁰ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 957. ; *Wirtschaft*, 552.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 958-59. ; *Ibid.*, 552-53

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 975. ; *Ibid.*, 563.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* ; *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* ; *Ibid.*, 563.

economy, where money, without regard for tradition, determines an individual's productive and consuming power. The shift in status helps buttress the bureaucratic order.

Taut discipline and control which at the same time have consideration for the official's sense of honor [. . . means] the bureaucratic apparatus functions more assuredly than does legal enslavement of the functionaries. A strong status sentiment [*Standesbewusstsein*] among officials not only is compatible with the official's readiness to subordinate himself to his superior without any will of his own, but – as in the case with the officer—status sentiments are the compensatory consequence of such subordination, serving to maintain the official's self-respect.¹⁰⁵

In an advanced bureaucratic order “functionaries” are not held with physical or legal chains but willingly subordinate themselves to their superiors for “compensatory consequences” such as the status inferred by their position. In this scenario while the bureaucrat excises “any will of his own,” he perversely gains “self-respect.” These insights anticipate the work of Siegfried Kracauer, who, as discussed in Chapter Three, demonstrates the extreme status-consciousness of Weimar white-collar employees.

Bureaucracy becomes so advanced that the “public administration as well as private economic management” cannot function without it. Weber writes: “The future belongs to bureaucratization . . . Bureaucracy is distinguished from other historical agencies of the modern rational order of life [*Lebensordnung*] in that it is far more persistent and ‘escape-proof [*Unentrinnbarkeit*].’”¹⁰⁶ All who rely on bureaucratic organizations, as citizens, consumers, or leaders, are confined by it. Even the monarch is

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 968. ; Ibid., 558.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 1401. ; Ibid., 834.

powerless in the face of the expert advisor who mediates the ruler's access to the specialized knowledge necessary for running the state.

Bureaucratic domination means the receding prospects of political revolution. In most cases the dismantling of private and state organizational apparatuses, which depend on the knowledge of a limited number of experts, would engender chaos. The decreased power of individuals and communities to obtain their basic necessities on their own means: "Increasingly the material fate of the masses depends upon the continuous and correct functioning of the ever more bureaucratic organizations of private capitalism, and the idea of eliminating them becomes more and more utopian."¹⁰⁷

Weber does not consider socialism a viable remedy for overwhelming bureaucratic power because he believes it would only intensify the driving force of organizational logic. Under capitalism at least the private economic and political bureaucracies check each other.¹⁰⁸ State socialism removes this built in conflict and the process of self-propelling bureaucratization continues unabated, becoming a dictatorship of the functionary. A change in the means of production and distribution of resources would not alter the course of modern bureaucratic power as socialism would be just as subject to "inescapable universal bureaucratization."¹⁰⁹

Weber was not anti-bureaucratic and admired the achievements of bureaucracy, which he saw as essential to modern politics and economics. But he warned that if pervasive and unchecked it could be dangerous to the health of the state.¹¹⁰ Bureaucracy

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 988. ; Ibid., 570.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 1402. ; Ibid., 835.

¹⁰⁹ "Socialism" (1918) in Max Weber, *Political Writings* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 279. Translation by Ronald Speirs from the original 1918 pamphlet, published in Vienna.

¹¹⁰ "Our officialdom has been brilliant wherever it had to prove its sense of duty, its impartiality and mastery of organization problems in the face of official, clearly formulated tasks of a special nature. . . . But here we are concerned with politic[s] . . . and the facts themselves [show] . . . That bureaucracy failed

is a necessary, but potentially dangerous tool of political power as it tends to work independently of the ruler, and of any rules other than its own. Good political leaders must have the skills to control their own bureaucracies.¹¹¹ Bureaucracy cannot realize political goals, but “is a precision instrument which can put itself at the disposal of quite varied interests, purely political as well as purely economic, or any other.”¹¹² Weber argues that the determination of interests, that is, of who wields the tool of bureaucracy and for what ends, should be a political, not a bureaucratic decision. Yet, he does not seem hopeful that political reason will prevail. In an appendix to *Economy and Society*, he writes: “An inanimate machine is mind objectified [*geronnener Geist*]. Only this provides it with the power to force men into its service and to dominate their everyday working life as completely as is actually the case in the factory.” Instrumental rationalization – “mind objectified” – can dominate men just as effectively as the physical machinery of the assembly line enslaves factory workers. “The bureaucratic organization” with its specialization, strict order, and rigid hierarchy is “also that animated machine.” Weber continues: “Together with the inanimate machine it is busy fabricating the shell of bondage [*Gehäuse jener Hörigkeit*] which men will perhaps be forced to inhabit someday, as powerless as the fellahs of ancient Egypt.”¹¹³

In his “prefatory remarks” to the *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion* (published in 1920), Weber uses the *Gehäuse* metaphor to argue:

completely whenever it was expected to deal with *political* problems. . . . Politicians must be the countervailing force against bureaucratic domination.” Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1417.

¹¹¹ H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, “Introduction: The Man and His Work,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 43.

¹¹² Weber, *Economy and Society*, 990. ; *Wirtschaft*, 571.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 1402. ; *Ibid.*, 835.

Apart from the modern West, no country and no period has quite known the *absolutely inescapable confinement* [*Gebanntheit*] of the fundamental political, technical, and economic conditions of our life and *of our whole existence* in the shell [*Gehäuse*] of an *organization* of specially trained officials, nor the technical, commercial, and especially the *legally* trained state official as the bearer of the *most important everyday functions of social life*.¹¹⁴

Our daily life depends of the functioning of highly organized and specialized officials. This dependency is so great that it forms a shell encompassing “our whole existence.”

Despite his undeniably effective and dramatic language, Weber concludes this text by self-diagnosing his own lack of artistic vision. He denies himself a license to indulge in exploration of the spiritual or meta-physical consequences of life in a highly rationalized modern world:

It is true that the whole course of human destiny swirls like a turbulent sea around the one who seeks to view a portion of it. But he will be well advised to keep his little personal comments to himself, as one does when faced with the sight of the ocean and the mountain ranges—unless he knows that he has a vocation for artistic expression or prophetic utterance and is endowed with the necessary gifts. In most other cases all the talk of “intuition” serves merely to conceal a lack of distance from the object of contemplation.¹¹⁵

Weber protests too much, he clearly does have a “vocation for artistic expression,” which his commitment to objectivity and scientific distance cannot quell. Weber’s utterances have indeed proved to be “prophetic”; that is why we continue to read him to this day,

¹¹⁴ Weber, “Prefatory Remarks to *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion*” in ———, *Protestant Ethic*, 358. My emphasis. Original available in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 368.

and not just to learn something about his age, but about ours as well. His most enduring image has entered the lexicon of everyday language; many people today refer to the “Protestant work ethic,” even without knowing that the concept originated over 100 years ago in the work of a German social theorist. Weber’s most well known concept appeared in the same place as his most famous metaphor – “a shell as hard a steel” (*Stahlhartes Gehäuse*). I am speaking of course, of *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism*, Weber’s book-length study of how the rationalization of a religious practice helped give birth to the “spirit of capitalism.”

II. Weber and *Menschentum*

“A Shell as Hard as Steel”

Weber is well known as the preeminent theoretician of rationalization and bureaucracy, but he is also, as one commentator has said, a “philosophical anthropologist” of these processes.¹¹⁶ As Weber sees it, the escape-proof nature of bureaucracy is not just an issue for bureaucrats, but for everyone who lives in the modern world. By the early twentieth century, all individuals, regardless of their title or position, were increasingly subject to powerful bureaucracies, not just in the workplace and political sphere, but also in many areas of their everyday lives. In the “Objectivity” essay Weber argues that the “entirety of cultural processes,” be they large or small, are conditioned by larger social forces, and therefore worthy of study.¹¹⁷ Weber writes that when the subject is economics, the social scientist should examine not only “economic phenomena,” but also “economically conditioned’ phenomena.” Here Weber reveals

¹¹⁶ Keith Tribe, “Introduction” in Hennis, *Max Weber : Essays in Reconstruction*, 15.

¹¹⁷ Weber, “Objectivity,” 369. ; “Objektivität,” 163.

himself to be a pioneer of twentieth century social theory. As Simmel explains in *The Philosophy of Money*, (first published in 1900), the object of social scientific research is no longer the “individual acts of the leaders,” but “the small daily events of the intellectual, cultural and political life”¹¹⁸

Echoing Simmel, Weber continues:

The processes of everyday life, no less than the ‘historical’ events of high politics, collective and mass phenomena, the ‘singular’ actions of statesmen, or individual literary or artistic achievements are ‘economically conditioned’ in this way. In return, the totality of lived phenomena and conditions within a historically given culture influences the formation of material needs, the manner in which they are satisfied, the formation of material interest groups and the nature of their coercive means.

As Weber explains, “the processes of everyday life” are just as deserving of analysis as the “events of high politics,” “mass phenomenon,” and the deeds of prominent individuals. For “the totality of lived phenomenon” are “economically conditioned.” He continues: “The formation of material needs” and “the manner in which they are satisfied” are not determined by nature alone, but are by history and culture as well.¹¹⁹ In this essay, Weber attempts to lay out a methodology appropriate to the insight that culture must be accounted for when analyzing “the formation of material needs.” Soon after “Objectivity” was published, Weber completed what he described as a “spiritual explanation” for the development of capitalism.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Simmel, *Money*, 277.

¹¹⁹ Weber, "Objectivity," 369. ; “Objektivität,” 163.

¹²⁰ To be fair to Weber I must point out that he does not believe a “spiritual” explanation alone is sufficient. As he explains in the final lines of *Protestant Ethic*: “It cannot, of course, be our purpose to replace a one-

The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism, was first published in 1905; it came out again in a slightly revised edition in 1920.¹²¹ In *Ethic*, Weber argues that the doctrine of salvation not through works, but through predestination, drove Protestants to look for proof of their future divine selection in earthly achievements. Ostentatious displays of wealth were discouraged and newly generated wealth was to be quickly reinvested rather than spent. This impulse created the Protestant “work ethic” which demanded conscientious labor and honest entrepreneurship. Individuals were to follow their own “calling,” translated in secular terms to “vocation” (*Beruf*). Though the evolving Protestant ethic did not start the development of capitalism, their “elective affinity” meant that each process buttressed the other. Over time however the spiritual origin for the guiding ethic dissipated, leaving behind only the drive and the world it created. In the opening pages of *Protestant*, Weber describes this world:

*Today’s capitalist economic order is a monstrous [ungeheurer] cosmos, into which the individual is born and which in practice is for him, at least as an individual, simply a given, an immutable shell [unabänderliches Gehäuse], in which he is obliged to live. It forces on the individual, to the extent that he is caught up in the relationships of the “market,” the norms of its economic activity. The manufacturer who consistently defies these norms will just as surely be forced out of business as the worker who cannot or will not conform will be thrown out of work.*¹²²

sided spiritual explanation with an equally one-sided spiritual one. *Both are equally possible.* ———, *Protestant Ethic*, 122. ; *Ethik*, 155.

¹²¹ I am working with the 1905 edition, for the differences between the two, see the “Editors’ Introduction” in *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*, 13. ; *Ibid.*, 16.

Individuals, be they worker or manufacturer, are born and “obliged to live” in a thoroughly rationalized system that is unyielding in its demand for conformity.

In the most famous passage of *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber argued that while “The Puritans *wanted* to be men of the calling [*Berufsmensch*]*—*we, on the other hand, *must be.*” The modern economic order is strong enough to overrule individual inclination as membership in it is no longer determined by voluntary affiliation or occupation. As Weber explains: “Today this mighty cosmos determines, with overwhelming coercion, the style of life *not only* of those directly involved in business but of every individual who is born into this mechanism.” Born into this “mighty cosmos” we cannot escape and are compelled to adapt our “style of life” accordingly. Under the original ethic, “concern for outward possessions should sit lightly on the shoulders [. . .] ‘like a thin cloak which can be thrown off at any time.’” “But,” Weber continues, “fate [*das Verhängnis*] decreed that the cloak should become a shell as hard as steel [*stahlhartes Gehäuse*] [. . . and] the outward goods of this world gained increasing and finally inescapable [*unentrinnbare*] power over men.”¹²³ In this dramatic passage, it is no longer just bureaucracy, but the entire “cosmos” that has become “inescapable.”

The spiritual goal, or end, of the Protestant work ethic has gone, its original animating spirit “has fled from its shell.” Now that “victorious” capitalism “rests on the foundation of the machine,” it no longer needs the support of the ascetic spirit of religion.¹²⁴ Weber predicts that even the “optimistic mood” of capitalism’s “laughing heir, The Enlightenment, seems destined to fade away.”¹²⁵ Weber cannot indulge in the

¹²³ Ibid., 120-21. ; “*Aber aus dem Mantel liess das Verhängnish ein stahlhartes Gehäuse werden.*” Ibid., 153.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 121. ; Ibid., 153-154.

¹²⁵ Ibid. ; Ibid., 154.

belief that the continuation of the enlightenment project – further progress in science and technology – will bring a greater yield in human happiness. “Progress” is now limited to technical advancement, not the improvement of *Menschentum*. The process that originally freed humans from the grip of superstition and ignorance has now left them in a “disenchanted” world, the “outward goods” of which can no longer be easily cast-off, but encases them in a shell as hard as steel.

Weber writes “No one yet knows who will live in that shell in the future.” Without new prophets or revolutions he predicts “ossification” of the bureaucratic order will set in.

Then, however, it might truly be said of the ‘last men’ in this cultural development: ‘specialists without spirit, hedonists without a heart [*Fachmenschen ohne Geist, Genussmenschen ohne Hertz*], these nonentities [*dies Nichts*] imagine they have attained a stage of humankind [*Menschentum*] never before reached.’ Here, however, we are getting into the area of judgments of value and belief, with which this purely historical study should not be encumbered.¹²⁶

Here, at the end of *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber reaches his greatest rhetorical heights, engaging in such weighty language as “spirit,” “heart,” and “humankind.” Yet again he pulls back, noting he has tread into “the area of judgments of value and belief” which have no business in a “purely historical study.” Nevertheless, he leaves the reader with a set of powerful images.

¹²⁶ Ibid. ; Ibid.

In these concluding remarks, Weber makes an explicit reference to Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.¹²⁷ In the relevant passage, Nietzsche describes a future where the soil of men's souls has become "poor and domesticated," and they no longer strive to go "beyond man." In the guise of the prophet Zarathustra, Nietzsche predicts: "the time is of the most despicable man is coming, he that is no longer able to despise himself. Behold, I show you the *last man*." In this age: "The earth has become small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small."¹²⁸

Weber's imagery interplays richly with the scene painted by Zarathustra. Weber's "nonentities," like Nietzsche's last men, have succeeded in mastering the world practically, believing themselves to have attained "a stage of humankind [*Menschentum*] never before reached." Yet by making everything manageable, they have, as Nietzsche argues, made the earth small in the process. The "last men" of this rational development have diminished themselves. Practical methods, or means, cannot provide *meaning*. This last "*Menschentum*" consists of "*Fachmenschen ohne Geist*," that is men whose thinking is pure calculation with no spirit, or *mind*, which is the other English equivalent of *Geist*. These men have appetites, but no passion (*Hertz*).

Weber's use of the term *Menschentum* is significant here. As Wilhelm Hennis explains, "*Menschentum*" is "that word in which the German language had since the mid-nineteenth century, chosen to express 'qualitative' interest in the history of humanity."¹²⁹ Even as Weber pulls back from "judgments of value and belief," the fate of *Menschentum* drives this "spiritual" study. For Weber "*Menschentum*" refers not so much to the

¹²⁷ For the relationship between Weber and Nietzsche, see especially Robert Eden, *Political Leadership & Nihilism: A Study of Weber & Nietzsche* (Tampa: University Presses of Florida, 1983).

¹²⁸ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 129.

¹²⁹ Hennis, *Max Weber: Essays in Reconstruction*, 44.

collective fate of the entity, “humanity,” as to the possibility that the individuals that make up humanity can find the form of their own lives. As he puts in the conclusion to the essay “Science as a Vocation,” (discussed below), the best hope for modern individuals is that “each finds and obeys the demon who holds the fibers of his very life” – that is, the passion that motivates his action.

The problem in a heavily rationalized world becomes how one can “find and obey” the fibers of his own life. Rationalization means depersonalization above all else. This is most clear in the case of bureaucracy where personal attributes must be jettisoned in favor of consistency and conformity. The bureaucrat is to operate “*sine ira studio*” – without hatred or love.¹³⁰ Without hatred or love, one will have a hard time finding and following his driving passion. In Hennis’s words, “complete rationality annihilates this free space,” where the individual can fashion his own life.¹³¹ It is no accident then that Weber compares men at the stage of development to those most “despicable” last men whom Nietzsche describes as “hopping” on the earth they have made small, “as ineradicable as the flea-beetle.”¹³² The “disenchanted” world is small one, with small inhabitants. The image of “little” men and women who are happy to conform and overestimate their stature will appear in more concrete form in Kracauer’s Weimar study of white-collar workers.

Disenchantment

In the 1919 essay, “Science as a Vocation,” Weber explains that the more rationalization increases, the less we understand about how the processes that determine

¹³⁰ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 225. ; *Wirtschaft*, 129.

¹³¹ Hennis, *Max Weber : Essays in Reconstruction*, 100.

¹³² Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, 129.

our daily existence actually work.¹³³ At the same time, as science advances, it diminishes other meaning giving systems, whiling offering only practical knowledge in return. It tells us how to do something, but not for what ultimate purpose. In other words, it provides means, not ends. The individual scientist's ambition is no longer total, and the most advanced science can tell us nothing about the totality of human existence. For even the best scientist can achieve "something truly perfect" only as a specialist working in a narrow field. The world is irrevocably split in two – science can tell us *how* things are and religion can purport to tell us *why*, but they no longer speak to each other.

Weber continues, "Scientific progress is a fraction, the most important fraction, of the process of intellectualization which we have been undergoing for thousands of years."¹³⁴ But this progress does not mean that we have "a greater knowledge of the conditions of life under which we exist," but in fact quite the opposite.

Unless he is a physicist, one who rides on the streetcar has no idea how the car happened to get into motion. [. . .] The savage knows incomparably more about his tools. [. . .] The savage know what he does in order to get his daily food and which institutions serve him in this pursuit. The increasing intellectualization and rationalization do *not*, therefore, indicate an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives. It means something else, namely, the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one *could* learn it any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. *This*

¹³³ Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York,: Oxford university press, 1946), 134. Hereafter "Science." ; Weber, "Wissenschaft Als Beruf," 80. Hereafter "Wissenschaft." "Science" was first given as a lecture in 1917.

¹³⁴ Weber, "Science," 139. ; "Wissenschaft," 86.

*means the world is disenchanted [die Entzauberung der Welt]. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service. This is above all what intellectualization means.*¹³⁵

The literal meaning of *Entzauberung* is “de-magicification.” The modern world is no longer run by superstition and tradition, but this liberation from magical thinking does not correspond to an increase in the individual’s power in his own environment. European life may be considerably more complex than that of the ‘savage,’ but whereas primitive man knew how to secure the materials for his daily existence, modern men are dependent on institutions and technologies that are beyond their control and comprehension. Individuals have neither intimate nor general knowledge about the mechanizations of daily life. At the same time, each one of those mechanizations is explainable and calculable, embodying no mystery or larger meaning.

In Weber’s view, rationalization operates on science, as well as political and economic institutions. As science specializes, it breaks down “big” questions about the nature of the universe into discrete, more manageable parts. Science however, fails to reassemble these fragments into a totality of meaning to replace the one which was once provided by the object of its greatest attack – religion. The individual is only partially compensated for this loss in meaning. He may profit from rationalized economic and political systems, but, as technology grows increasingly complex, he can understand and impact their operations less and less.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 139 ; Ibid., 86-87.

Renaissance scientists, promoters of the rational experiment, expected discoveries of scientific truth to provide moral, artistic, and religious meaning. Science at this stage still promised spiritual liberation by stripping away the mysteries of divine creation and showing “the path to God.”¹³⁶ Today however: “If the natural sciences lead to anything in this way, they are apt to make the belief that there is such a thing as the ‘meaning’ of the universe die at its very roots.”¹³⁷ Modern science finds its strength in specialization and in the production of facts. Only “big children” could believe “that the findings of astronomy, biology, physics, or chemistry could teach us anything about the *meaning* of the world.”¹³⁸

The diminishing power of religion is another result of the “process of intellectualization,” that is, the drive to find a practical explanation for everything. Religion used to serve an unambiguous, *rational* purpose, it used to *explain* things. It was the way communities and individuals made sense of the world. Pragmatically, religions of salvation explained the suffering and inequalities inherent in life on Earth. As Weber explains in an essay on the historical development of religion, religion once answered the demand “that the world order in its totality is, could, and should somehow be a meaningful ‘cosmos.’”¹³⁹ Now however, “the general result of the modern form of thoroughly rationalizing the conception of the world and the way of life, theoretically and practically,” has shifted religion to “the realms of the irrational.”¹⁴⁰ In a “demystified” – that is rationalized – world, religion is relegated to the irrational sphere and “the ultimate and most sublime values” occupy that increasingly thin sliver of space left untouched by

¹³⁶ Ibid., 142. ; Ibid., 91.

¹³⁷ Ibid. ; Ibid., 92.

¹³⁸ Ibid. ; Ibid.

¹³⁹ From “The Social Psychology of the World Religions” in Weber, *From Max Weber*, 281.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

rationalization.¹⁴¹ Religion and other meaning-giving traditions are cordoned off from the public and political sphere, areas now dominated by science and politics.¹⁴² After the divorce of religion and reason, “Redemption *from* rationalism and intellectualism of science is the fundamental presupposition of living in union with the divine.”¹⁴³ Religion becomes a refuge from impersonal rationalization. Individual death and suffering is immaterial to the instrumentally rational point of view. Modern, practical “rationalism” offers technique but not comfort. Most significantly, a “disenchanted” world offers no explanation or purpose for human mortality – the one problem science cannot solve.¹⁴⁴ Formally rationalism in religion provided comfort. In the religious worldview, death gave way to eternal life and injustice in this world was balanced in the next. In a “disenchanted” world, death is an arbitrary end, not a transformation to something “beyond” man.

Ultimately Weber declines to make a final judgment about rationalization. He does not advocate a return to an idealized communal past (as did Werner Sombart and the early Ferdinand Tönnies), but instead recognizes the historical inevitability and even the benefits of rationalization.¹⁴⁵ He believes human beings will always seek rational explanations. “For the rationality, in the sense of logical or teleological ‘consistency’ of

¹⁴¹ Weber, "Science," 155. ; “Wissenschaft,” 109.

¹⁴² Weber’s language was anticipated by his friend Georg Simmel in the latter’s book, *The Philosophy of Money*, first published in 1900. Simmel writes: “the life and actions of civilized man pass through an infinite number of purposive systems of which he can control, or even conceive, only a very small part, so that, compared with the simplicity of primitive existence, a frightening differentiation of the elements of life emerges.” Simmel, *Money*, 476.

¹⁴³ Weber, "Science," 142. ; “Wissenschaft,” 92.

¹⁴⁴ Detlev Peukert discusses the uneasy confrontation of science and human mortality in the context of the Weimar Republic in Detlev Peukert, "The Genesis of the 'Final Solution' from the Spirit of Science," in *Nazism and German Society, 1933-1945*, ed. David F. Crew (London ; New York: Routledge, 1994). Peukert’s essay is discussed in Chapter Four.

¹⁴⁵ For Sombart see Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*, 1986 ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984; reprint, 1998). For Tönnies see Arthur Mitzman, *Sociology and Estrangement: Three Sociologists of Imperial Germany*, [1st ed. (New York,: Knopf; [distributed by Random House], 1973).

an intellectual-theoretical or practical-ethical attitude has and always has had power over man, however limited and unstable this power is and always has been in the face of other forces of historical life.”¹⁴⁶ The harsh irony of the human longing for explanation is that it eventually undermines those very “attitudes” often present in religion and other meaning-giving systems.¹⁴⁷ More and more facts pile up, but modern knowledge dismantles ancient meanings without providing new ones. This situation constitutes what Weber scholar Laurence Scaff calls the “deepest paradox” of Weber’s diagnosis. Science cannot speak to the truth of life and religion cannot speak the (factual) truth. While more conciliatory than Nietzsche towards those who make the “intellectual sacrifice” of believing, Weber sees the turn to science for salvation as a sign of weakness: “After Nietzsche’s devastating criticism of those ‘last men’ who ‘invented happiness,’ I may leave aside altogether the naïve optimism in which science—that is, the technique of mastering life which rests upon science—has been celebrated as the way to happiness.”¹⁴⁸ Here Weber refers to the same passage of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that he did in *The Protestant Ethic*. These last men mistake physical comfort for happiness; they have left “the regions where it was hard to live” and are “no longer able to despise” themselves. They seek small truths rather than big ones, which are more sobering after the death of God.

Science follows the fragmentation that is the work of rationalized bureaucracy. Rationalization breaks down large tasks into small “truths”: the assembly of goods, the

¹⁴⁶ “Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions” in Weber, *From Max Weber*, 324.

¹⁴⁷ This situation constitutes what Scaff calls the “deepest paradox” of Weber’s diagnosis.” Scaff, *Fleeing the Iron Cage*, 112.

¹⁴⁸ Weber, “Science,” 155. ; “Wissenschaft,” 43.

organization of people – be it the movement of military units through the countryside or students through trade school. As Weber explains:

A civilized man, who is put in the midst of the continuing enrichment of civilization with thoughts, knowledge and problems, can become ‘tired of life’, but not ‘satiated with life.’ He snatches only the tiniest part of what the life of the spirit constantly produces, and then only something provisional, rather than final; thus death is for him a meaningless occurrence.¹⁴⁹

Where once men hoped that science would bring them closer to the divine, honest scientists must admit it just brings us closer to the earth. Human beings are just another biological organism, and theology is obsolete.

Weber and the Discourses

Since Weber, any analysis of rationalization or bureaucracy must acknowledge a debt to his comprehensive, practically definitive treatment of the topics. He covered their development in exhaustive historical detail. Yet we go back to Weber’s description of rationalization and bureaucracy not just for his thoroughness, but for his inventiveness too. Even as it went against his own professions of “objectivity,” Weber’s created images and terminology that live on. For English readers the “Iron Cage” is one such image.

Talcott Parsons’s translation, the first into English and still arguably the most famous, reads: “fate decreed that the cloak should become an *iron cage*.”¹⁵⁰ As Peter Baehr, translator (along with Gordon C. Wells) of a new edition of *Ethic* argues, Parsons’s translation gives the metaphor a different, if equally powerful, coloring than the

¹⁴⁹ ———, “The Vocation of Science,” 274. In this instance, I prefer this translation to Weber, “Science,” 140. ; “Wissenschaft,” 88.

¹⁵⁰ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 121. ; *Ethik*, 153.

original.¹⁵¹ In Parson's rendering a natural element, iron, imprisons as a cage. In the more literal translation of Baehr and Wells, a man-made element, steel, encases men as a kind of hybrid man-made and natural cloak. Thus humans are more directly implicated in their own imprisonment and cannot escape it by simply walking out of the cage. *Gehäuse* is not something you get in or out of – it is something we live in; a shell cannot be easily shed like a cloak. The translation of “shell” for *Gehäuse* gets closer at one of Weber's driving questions about the *Menschentum* of the future: *how will they be?* As we have seen, Weber uses the term *Gehäuse* in other places as well, including when describing the confining nature of modern bureaucracy.

Kurt Lenk suggests such “fateful” language and imagery pushes against the grain of Weber's own criteria for proper social science.

Yet, the irrationality of social and political life, which Weber wants to expel from scientific work, reappears metaphorically in his own thinking as inexplicable “fate” or as an “iron cage,” which surrounds people in the late stage of bourgeois society [. . .] The rationality of individual consciousness is not in itself a constitutive element of the human psyche, but rather the result of an adaptation to predominant societal forces. Thus, Weber's individual who is acting purposefully-rationally is determined just as much by the “rationality” of the society.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ See P. R. Baehr, *Founders, Classics, Canons: Modern Disputes over the Origins and Appraisal of Sociology's Heritage* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2002).

¹⁵² Kurt Lenk, “The Tragic Consciousness of German Sociology,” in *Modern German Sociology*, ed. Volker Meja, Dieter Misgeld, and Nico Stehr (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 64-65.

Weber struggles to describe social actions and cultural developments objectively and dispassionately because humans themselves rarely act dispassionately. Even “rationality” itself is determined by the “rationality” of a given society.

The image of modern rationalization as not only confining and oppressive, but as effecting a change in the make-up of humankind itself, is important for texts of the first and second discourses. Horkheimer and Adorno, Arendt, and Bauman all take important parts of Weber’s critique of rationalization to make their own. This is not to say Weber would endorse all of their conclusions. He would almost certainly find the “rationalization” of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Modernity and the Holocaust* less nuanced than his own. That’s why Lenk’s point that “rationality” is relative, is important. As discussed in Chapter Four, historians, for whom context is everything, effectively critique the analyses of Horkheimer and Adorno, Arendt, and Bauman where rationalization and bureaucracy become self-propelling, rather than human-engineered processes. We must remember that Weber showed there were spiritual and cultural, that is human, motivations behind the development of the “monstrous cosmos” of our rationalized world.

Simmel was much less hesitant than Weber to consider what living in this cosmos means for individual’s souls and personalities. Reading Weber and Simmel together helps open Weber up to more cultural questions, showing that the great theoretician of rationalization, was also a great philosopher of *Menschentum*. Weber also gives us a way into Kracauer. With his emphasis on status in favor of class, Weber challenges the notion that workers are driven only by wages, but argues instead that they demonstrate the Protestant work ethic, which they have been “educated” in by modern culture, though its

origins may have long been forgotten. It is not, contra Marx, always to the capitalist's advantage to suppress wages but to employ better paid and performing employees who embody the Protestant spirit (even if they are not actually Protestants, or religious at all).

Weber writes:

Here a well-developed sense of responsibility is absolutely indispensable, along with a general attitude which . . . performs the work as though it were an absolute end in itself—a 'calling.'¹⁵³

The second discourse takes this "general attitude" and what Weber called the "compensatory consequences of such subordination" as one of its central subjects. Weber even cites "a specifically *middle-class ethic of the calling*."¹⁵⁴ Kracauer and other Weimar era commentators believe this subordination creates a false consciousness that leads to political blindness. For post-Holocaust commentators the cost of this total submission is enormous – the thinking individual, one capable of ethical reflection is, in Horkheimer and Adorno's words "going under." Reading Weber's words today: "specialist without spirit, hedonist without heart," it is hard not to see the specter of Eichmann. This is not to say Weber predicted Eichmann, he did not. The horror of the Holocaust, so often and aptly described as "unimaginable" had not yet become imaginable. Yet Arendt's description of Eichmann as a "banal" bureaucrat found such a ready audience because we had already begun, with Weber's help, to understand that we lived in a world ruled by rationalization, dependent on and confined by the power of bureaucracy.

¹⁵³ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 17. ; *Ethik*, 21.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 118. ; *Ibid.*, 150.

Chapter Two:

Georg Simmel and the Philosophy of Rationalization

I. Rationalization Inside and Out

The Domain of Philosophy

In the preface to the second edition of *The Philosophy of Money*, published in 1907, Georg Simmel makes a surprising statement about his over 500 page book: “Not a single line of these investigations is meant to be a statement about economics.”¹⁵⁵ He explains that all research “of a more fundamental nature” reaches a point where it “ceases to be exact and takes on a philosophical character” (*in die philosophische Form übergeht*).¹⁵⁶ *Money* offers not a history of money, but an examination of “its essence” and “its effects upon the inner world [*die innere Welt*]- upon the vitality of individuals, upon the linking of their fates, upon culture in general.”¹⁵⁷ In place of a narrative of the historical development of the money economy or a schematic of economic forms, Simmel uses the phenomenon of money as “simply a means” for accessing “the most profound currents of individual life and history.”¹⁵⁸ Where Marx and Weber looked at the “monstrous cosmos” capitalism created, in *The Philosophy of Money* Simmel endeavors “to construct a new story beneath historical materialism.”¹⁵⁹ The level of his investigation is not a physical, but a psychological one – the study of money’s “effects upon the inner world – upon the vitality of individuals, upon the linking of their fates, upon culture in

¹⁵⁵ Simmel, *Money*, 54. Hereafter *Money*. ; Simmel, *Geld*, VII. Hereafter *Geld*.

¹⁵⁶ Simmel, *Money*, 53. ; *Geld*, V.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 54. ; *Ibid.*, VI.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 55. ; *Ibid.*, VII.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 56. ; *Ibid.*, VIII. The phrase “monstrous cosmos” appears in Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 13.

general.”¹⁶⁰ While a turn to the interior may appear to be less wide-ranging in scope than what is typical of the first discourse (explored in the previous chapter), it is no less ambitious. As Simmel explains: “The significance and purpose of the whole undertaking is simply to derive from the *surface level* [*Oberfläche*] of economic affairs a guideline that leads to *the ultimate values and things of importance in all that is human.*”¹⁶¹ In *Money* and complementary writings Simmel examines rationalization and the consequences it has for the inner lives of individuals – that is not just for the economy, civilization, or society -- but for “all that is human [*Menschlichen*].” Simmel never explicitly lays out these “ultimate values and things of importance,” but in *Money* he connects “life’s details” to the “totality of its meaning.”¹⁶² For Simmel, the exchange of products between two people “is by no means simply an economic fact,” an assertion he proves by demonstrating how the everyday activities of buying, selling, and living among strangers make modern life a fragmenting, but also liberating experience.¹⁶³

Weber also described himself as practicing a ‘human’ science but he did not consider the “inner world” to be a proper subject for sociology, or any *Wissenschaft*.¹⁶⁴ Weber treated individual actions as products of broader developments (for example the “ascetic spirit” of Calvinism) and avoided anything that approached psychology. Simmel on the other hand, whether he is writing on “coquetry” or “bribery,” consistently returns to the question of individual experience: that is how small acts, such as paying for groceries, commuting, eating a meal, and dressing, create the texture of individual

¹⁶⁰ Simmel, *Money*, 54. ; *Geld*, VI. Simmel originally planned to call his book *The Psychology of Money*.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 55. ; Simmel, *Geld*, VII.

¹⁶² *Ibid.* ; *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.* ; *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ In his inaugural lecture at the University of Freiburg, Weber referred to political economy as a “human science.” Max Weber, “The National State and Economic Policy (Freiberg Address),” *Economy and Society* 9, no. 4 (1980): 437.

experience. Above all Simmel is concerned with how “the small daily events of the intellectual, cultural and political life” determine how individuals develop and maintain their personalities in the face of overwhelming rationalized culture.¹⁶⁵

In this chapter’s two sections, “Rationalization Inside and Out” and “The Individual: Simmel’s ‘Unity of Meaning,’” I show how Simmel’s analysis of rationalization overlaps and departs from Weber’s. I argue that Simmel’s unique theory of cultural production opens up new questions about modern experiences of labor, consumption and urban life, thus building a bridge between the theoretical and historical analysis of rationalization and the specific “ethnographic” study of Weimar white-collar workers that Kracauer made a generation after *Money* was published. In addition to *The Philosophy of Money* my analysis draws on several of Simmel’s shorter essays, many of which were first published in periodicals, both popular and scholarly, and have proved to be the most enduring and influential part of his work.

Simmel takes an unexpected route to the “inner world” – through the “surface level” of everyday social interactions. Simmel believes that even trivial acts offer insight into the overall functioning of society – that the “smallest elements are the genuine and fundamental basis of life.”¹⁶⁶ In his most famous piece, “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903), Simmel offers an elegant explanation for his technique of surface investigation. After noting that only the “strictest punctuality” in enforcing the coordination of “all clocks and watches in Berlin” into “a stable and impersonal time

¹⁶⁵ Simmel, *Money*, 277. ; *Geld*, 291.

¹⁶⁶ “Sociology of the Senses” (1907), translated by Mark Ritter and David Frisby in ———, *Simmel on Culture*, 109. Original publication: Georg Simmel, “Soziologie Der Sinne,” *Die Neue Rundschau* 2, no. 18 (1907).

schedule” prevents the city made up of “so many people with such differentiated interests” from breaking down into “an inextricable chaos,” Simmel concludes:

Here again this entire task of reflection becomes obvious, namely, that from each point on the surface of existence [*Oberfläche des Daseins*]*—*however closely attached to the surface alone*—*one may drop a sounding into the depth of the psyche so that the most banal externalities of life finally are connected with the ultimate decisions concerning the meaning and style of life [*Sinn und Stil des Lebens*].¹⁶⁷

A time schedule may appear banal but for Simmel it becomes something else. More than a symbol of the calculation and standardization demanded by metropolitan life, it is a product of a specifically modern form of being – a new “style of life.” Its proper functioning demands the assent of all participating individuals and makes new kinds of relationships, especially economic ones, possible. From the seemingly superficial – a time schedule -- Simmel is able, in just a few sentences, to explain “the passionate hatred of men like Ruskin and Nietzsche for the metropolis” as they value an “unschematized existence which cannot be defined with precision for all alike.”¹⁶⁸ Simmel does not share this hatred however. While acutely aware of the toll extracted by an urbanized, schematized existence – he is also attuned to its possibilities, arguing the city “is the locale of freedom.”¹⁶⁹ For while the metropolis requires standardization, individuals themselves push back against this demand through self-differentiation, a process made

¹⁶⁷ Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950), 413. Hereafter “Metropolis” ; Georg Simmel, “Die Grosstädte Und Das Geistesleben,” in *Aufsätze Und Abhandlungen: 1901-1908* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), 119-20. Hereafter “Großstädte.”

¹⁶⁸ Simmel, “Metropolis,” 412.; Simmel, “Großstädte,” 120.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 12. ; *Ibid.*, 126.

easier by the freedom from traditional economic and social constraints and the power to assert identity through consumption. Throughout his work, as he does in “Metropolis,” Simmel looks at the social revolutions brought on by modernization and asks how the individual both adjusts to and in turn helps produce these changes and it is on the individual level that Simmel confronts rationalization.

Although an admirer and close friend of Simmel, in the 1908 essay “Georg Simmel as Sociologist,” Weber describes Simmel’s unsystematic methodology as “unacceptable.”¹⁷⁰ Weber continues in a slightly complaining tone: “Simmel draws examples from the most diverse provinces of knowledge to illustrate a sociological matter, and indeed frequently in the form of an ‘analogy.’”¹⁷¹ A diversity of subject matter and essayistic prose are markers of Simmel’s style and while it did not meet Weber’s strict methodological standards for objective and dispassionate analysis, the latter had to concede that Simmel’s “mode of exposition is simply brilliant and, what is more important, attains results that are intrinsic to it and not to be attained by any imitator.”¹⁷² A literary style, interest in the everyday, attention to the experiencing individual, and an openness to exploring the philosophical and spiritual implications of rationalization, are all traits of the second discourse.

Like Weber, Simmel recognized that the natural sciences are inadequate for the description of culture, which necessitates the evaluation of socially produced meanings and values. An interpretation of culture requires more than just a classification of facts because, in Simmel’s view, cultural forms are in a constant state of flux and never fixed

¹⁷⁰ The essay was never completed, the fragment is translated by Donald N. Levine and included, with commentary, in: Max Weber, “Georg Simmel as Sociologist,” *Social Research* 39 (1972): 158.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*: 159-60.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*: 158.

into “fact.” But while Weber granted the need for interpretation, he maintained objectivity on the part of the social scientist was achievable and necessary, and fought hard to maintain scientific rigor, even when it meant backing away from his own prophetic insights. Simmel on the other hand was explicit about the creative role of the cultural critic as philosopher.¹⁷³ He maintained that philosophy, “as an interpretation, a coloring and an individually selective emphasis of what is real,” could do something that even the most refined empiricism could not. For modern science does not make philosophy obsolete any more than “the perfection of the mechanical reproduction of phenomena make the visual arts superfluous.”¹⁷⁴ In other words, *because* philosophical analysis does not provide an exact reproduction of reality, it is able to achieve a more accurate rendering of life as actually experienced by individuals.

Simmel’s philosophical approach can be described as “phenomenological,” as in the study of things (phenomena) and how they appear to the individual and how he or she experiences and understands them. As Simmel practices it, “philosophy” does not entail a metaphysical exercise detached from concrete reality, an approach which he called “the doom of philosophy,” but to the critical investigation of everyday experience.¹⁷⁵ Such an investigation cannot begin with “a set of prior assumptions about the nature or character of social existence.”¹⁷⁶ Rather, as Simmel explains in the opening to *Money*, his goal “is to think *without pre-conditions* – a goal which the individual sciences deny themselves

¹⁷³ Weber noted that “Simmel’s ultimate *interests* are directed to metaphysical problems, to the ‘*meaning*’ of life.” Ibid.: 161.

¹⁷⁴ Simmel, *Money*, 53. ; Simmel, *Geld*, V. Simmel frequently wrote on the visual arts, including the monograph, *Rembrandt*. Georg Simmel, *Rembrandt : An Essay in the Philosophy of Art* (New York ; London: Routledge, 2005).

¹⁷⁵ Cited in the translator’s introduction to *Sociology*. Georg Simmel, *Sociology : Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms* (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2009), 4.

¹⁷⁶ Deena Weinstein and Michael A. Weinstein, "Dimensions of Conflict: Georg Simmel on Modern Life," in *Georg Simmel and Contemporary Sociology*, ed. Michael Kaern, Bernard S. Phillips, and R. S. Cohen (Dordrecht ; Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), 342.

since they do not take any step without proof.” He continues: “If the start of the philosophical domain marks, as it were, the lower boundary of the exact domain, then its upper boundary lies at the point where the ever-fragmentary [*immer fragmentarischen*] contents of positive knowledge seek to be augmented by definite concepts into a world picture and to be related to the totality of life.”¹⁷⁷ Here Simmel reverses Plato’s cave analogy – it is not the transitory objects of everyday experience which deceive us and block our access to contemplating the eternal real, but the reified, pre-decided concepts of hard science – the “exact domain” of “positive knowledge” which are unable to capture the “totality of life,” which exists in constant motion and can never be fixed into “the exact domain.” For Simmel the only essential fact of culture is its continuous flux, which is perceived as social “forms,” temporary crystallizations which quickly give way to new ones.

As the sciences advance they specialize, fragmenting “positive knowledge” into so many different facts without providing a comprehensive, meaningful explanation for why things are the way they are. This circumstance is what Weber called “disenchantment.” If this is the state of the epistemological enterprise in a disenchanted world, it is a condition also reflected in individual metropolitan experience – a “fragmentary” existence where time is split between working and consuming and the community one is born to is replaced with multiple voluntary associations. An examination of the fragmented modern self is at the heart of Simmel’s social theory. Philosophy, even one grounded in everyday experience, cannot solve the problem of fragmentation, but by acknowledging the consequences of disenchantment for the individual, it offers the best chance for understanding how we live in the modern world.

¹⁷⁷ Simmel, *Money*, 53. : Simmel, *Geld*, V.

Known as the most “philosophical” of sociologists in his time and since, Simmel wrote to Célestin Bouglé in 1899: “it somewhat saddens me that abroad I count only as a sociologist—whereas I am a philosopher, see in philosophy my life’s task and practice sociology really only as a sideline.”¹⁷⁸ Indeed Simmel was a reluctant “father” of sociology; although he was a founding member of the DGS (German Sociological Society), by the time of its first meeting in 1909 he had already moved beyond strictly sociological topics in his own work to focus on “philosophy, literature and art.”¹⁷⁹ As such he refused the offer to be DGS president.¹⁸⁰ Simmel left the sociological society just one year after its second meeting.¹⁸¹ Nevertheless he was one of the first in Germany -- and Europe -- to promote and teach sociology.¹⁸² Today we do not need to make as sharp a distinction as Simmel himself did between philosophy and sociology.¹⁸³ I follow Deena and Michael Weinstein who argue Simmel’s sociology is “a decisive and necessary

¹⁷⁸ 1899 letter quoted in Baehr, *Founders, Classics, Canons*, 11. To give but a few examples of Simmel’s ‘philosophical’ reputation: “Simmel considered sociology a branch of philosophy” Uta Gerhardt, *German Sociology* (New York: Continuum, 1998), ix. “He remains above all a philosopher” Julien Freund, “German Sociology in the Time of Max Weber,” in *A History of Sociological Analysis*, ed. T. B. Bottomore and Robert A. Nisbet (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 157. “His was a philosophical spirit in the truest and purest sense, spirit as only the greatest possess it” Georg Lukács, “Memories of Georg Simmel,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 8, no. 3 (1991): 146. See also Christopher Adair-Totef, “Introduction” in *Sociological Beginnings: The First Conference of the German Society for Sociology*, ed. Christopher Adair-Totef (Liverpool [England]: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 8.

¹⁷⁹ David Frisby, *Georg Simmel* (Chichester: Ellis Horwood ;Tavistock Publications, 1984), 32. Although his *Soziologie* did not appear until 1908, everything but the excursus “Digression on the Problem: How is Society Possible?” had previously been published elsewhere. Klaus Lichtblau argues that Simmel had developed a “clear and precise conception of sociology” at the latest by the publication of *On Social Differentiation* in 1890, and that the 1917 study *The Fundamental Question of Sociology* only refines Simmel’s “pure” sociology for “pedagogical purposes.” Klaus Lichtblau, “Causality or Interaction? Simmel, Weber and Interpretive Sociology,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 8, no. 3 (1991): 37-38; *ibid.*, 38.

¹⁸⁰ Baehr, *Founders, Classics, Canons*, 11.

¹⁸¹ Scaff, *Fleeing the Iron Cage*, 143-44.

¹⁸² Simmel delivered his first lecture on the program of sociology in 1894, that same year he published “Das Problem der Soziologie,” which became the first chapter of *Soziologie*. Baehr, *Founders, Classics, Canons*, 11.

¹⁸³ The Weinstains call Simmel “a postmodernist ahead of the discourse.” Deena and Michael A. Weinstein, “Georg Simmel: Sociological Bricoleur,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 8, no. 3 (1991): 152.

element in his total vision.”¹⁸⁴ As this chapter’s first section will demonstrate Simmel made social interactions and the social forms they produce the core of his sociology. Simmel’s more ‘philosophical’ work – *Money* and essays on the metropolis and culture – actually complement his sociology by considering the psychic costs and benefits of the interactions that compose “society.”

As the Weinsteins argue, “‘Metropolis’ gives the sociological answer to the question of how a philosophy of money is possible by showing what it is about social life that has favored the triumph of quantitative over qualitative judgment and what the consequences of that victory are for individual subjectivity.”¹⁸⁵ Modern, especially urban, social life follows the rationalization of economic life where calculation trumps evaluation and people themselves are treated as objects. Yet despite the power of the money economy, money itself is abstract – thus a philosophy of money that is grounded in the concrete is possible only by showing how the money economy affects everyday life. By examining how money promotes the dominance of objectivity (rationalization) over subjectivity (individual experience and development), Simmel’s sociology undergirds his philosophy. Simmel speaks to the first discourse by detailing the large-scale social transformations made possible by the money economy and urbanization; he speaks to the second discourse by examining the effects of the same for “individual subjectivity” at the level of the everyday. With an approach that refuses to separate broad philosophical issues from the seemingly mundane realities of daily life, Simmel mediates between the discourses. In Simmel’s view, the modern individual is both a creation of rationalization *and* the site of resistance to it – not a political resistance, or one that will

¹⁸⁴ Weinstein, "Dimensions of Conflict: Georg Simmel on Modern Life," 343.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 344.

negate rationalization by returning to an imagined pre-modern harmony or revolutionizing the means of production – but a resistance that both draws from and pushes back against objective culture to find a space for itself.

Simmel was born in Berlin in 1858. He lived most of his life in the Prussian capital, attending university there and writing his dissertation on Kant. He began teaching at Berlin University in 1885 and was a popular lecturer on subjects as diverse as history, social psychology, sociology, philosophy, and religion. His research interests were broad and he published over twenty volumes and three hundred shorter pieces on a variety of topics, from Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, to “the philosophy of history,” the status of women, Rembrandt, psychology, urbanization, coquetry, fashion, gratitude, and of course *The Philosophy of Money*, which he offered as an alternative to Marx’s *Capital*.¹⁸⁶

Despite his rough professional road, Simmel enjoyed an international reputation during his lifetime. Many of his articles were quickly translated abroad and he was an important figure for the development of the Chicago School of American sociology.¹⁸⁷ His first major works were *On Social Differentiation* (1890) and the *Problems of the Philosophy of History* (1892).¹⁸⁸ *The Philosophy of Money* first came out in 1900, followed by the second edition, revised and enlarged, in 1907. His “big” *Sociology* of 1908 collected

¹⁸⁶ Frisby, *Georg Simmel*, xiii. See also Simmel’s promotional comments for *The Philosophy of Money*, which Poggi translates and includes his book. Gianfranco Poggi, *Money and the Modern Mind : Georg Simmel's Philosophy of Money* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

¹⁸⁷ Donald N. Levine, E. B. Carter, E. Miller Gorman, "Simmel's Influence on American Sociology " in *Georg Simmel: Critical Assessments* ed. David Frisby (New York: Routledge, 1994). The third volume of *Critical Assessments* contains several additional articles on this topic.

¹⁸⁸ Georg Simmel, *Über Soziale Differenzierung. Soziologische Und Psychologische Untersuchungen* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1890). Parts of this work are translated in Georg Simmel, *Georg Simmel : Sociologist and European*, trans. Peter A. Lawrence (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1976). Georg Simmel, *Die Probleme Der Geschichtesphilosophie. Eine Erkenntnistheoretische Studie*, 3. erw. Aufl. ed. (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1907). English translation Georg Simmel, *The Problems of the Philosophy of History : An Epistemological Essay* (New York: Free Press, 1977).

several previously published essays; the “little” sociology, *Fundamental Problems of Sociology*, appeared in 1917.¹⁸⁹

Contemporaries recognized Simmel as the “center of the intellectual elite,” and he was friends not only with Weber, but also with the poets Stefan George and Rainer Maria Rilke, the philosopher Martin Buber, and a teacher to Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, and Siegfried Kracauer.¹⁹⁰ Despite these impressive connections, Simmel was denied a full professorship until 1914, and even then, received one in philosophy only at the relatively minor University of Strasbourg where he taught until his death in 1918.¹⁹¹ Explanations for Simmel’s slow professional advancement include his Jewish heritage, unorthodox teaching and writing styles, an “unfocused” body of work, interest in the new discipline of sociology, and because, as Weber reported in 1905, Simmel “was the only social scientist” he knew that had “contributed (anonymously) to the official Socialist press.”¹⁹² The prominent Simmel scholar David Frisby speculates that colleagues were jealous of Simmel’s popularity as a lecturer and took a dim view of some the students he attracted, including women (he was one of the few to allow them in class) and “the wrong kind” from Eastern European countries.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁹ Georg Simmel, *Soziologie : Untersuchungen Über Die Formen Der Vergesellschaftung*, ed. Otthein Rammstedt, 1. Aufl. ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992). English translation, Simmel, *Sociology : Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms*. Georg Simmel, *Grundfragen Der Soziologie (Individuum Und Gesellschaft)* (Berlin/Leipzig: Goschen, 1917). Complete English translation available in Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950).

¹⁹⁰ Frisby, *Georg Simmel*, 37. Frisby cites M. Landmann: “His [Simmel’s] audience at the University of Berlin was the largest and most select. He had connection not only with foremost philosophers and academics of his time, with Bergson, Troeltsch and Max Weber, but also with artists and poets, with Rodin, George and Rilke. He was the centre of the intellectual elite.”

¹⁹¹ At different points both Weber and Rickert tried in vain to secure an appointment for Simmel at Heidelberg. Jürgen Habermas, “Georg Simmel on Philosophy and Culture: Postscript to a Collection of Essays,” *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 3 (1996): 404.

¹⁹² Weber’s letter to Heinrich Braun, cited in Mitzman, *Sociology and Estrangement*, 32. For references to some of these articles, see Frisby, *Georg Simmel*, xix.

¹⁹³ Frisby, *Georg Simmel*, 27.

Weber and Simmel

Like Weber, Simmel understands rationalization as a process which, by favoring means over ends, privileges functions over individuals, leads to depersonalization and threatens to become a process of dehumanization. However despite sharing this primary concern, Weber and Simmel take different approaches to sociological analysis, and as a result they emphasize different consequences of rationalization. Weber examines rationalization primarily at ‘high’ levels, asking how it affects large-scale political and economic structures. His “social categories” are geared towards “universal-historical investigations.” Simmel on the other hand begins with “microscopic analyses of the everyday social interactions,” a method which is ultimately psychological, yielding more insights into the effects of rationalization on the interior worlds of individuals.¹⁹⁴ He talks about rationalization as *objectification*, a term which implies its opposite – subjectivity, and, as Donald Levine puts it, means Simmel is consistently attuned to “the phenomenology of personal experience and the assertions of subjective individuality.”¹⁹⁵

Simmel began explicitly defining the parameters of the new discipline of sociology years before Weber began to lay out his own theory of “interpretive sociology.” Simmel did not address Weber directly in any of his published works, and Weber made only a few references to Simmel.¹⁹⁶ Yet historians of sociology have long

¹⁹⁴ Klaus Lichtblau, "Causality or Interaction? Simmel, Weber and Interpretive Sociology," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 8, no. 3 (1991): 34.

¹⁹⁵ Levine, *The Flight from Ambiguity : Essays in Social and Cultural Theory*, 201.

¹⁹⁶ Lichtblau, "Causality or Interaction?," 39. By contrast, Lichtblau notes that Weber “refers directly and indirectly to Simmel in the various essays in his *Wissenschaftslehre*, in his writings on the sociology of religion, at the beginning of his *Basic Concepts of Sociology (Soziologische Grundbegriffe)* and in *Economy and Society*,” 30. In his introduction to “Georg Simmel as Sociologist,” Levine notes that: “This is the only sustained discussion of Simmel’s work that Weber wrote. It is the introduction to what was planned as a long critical essay, first mentioned by Weber in a footnote in his 1905 essay on “Knies und das Irrationalitätsproblem.” “Introduction” to Weber, "Georg Simmel," 157.

suggested that Simmel influenced Weber in important ways methodologically.¹⁹⁷ Several commentators have also noted that *Money* was very significant for Weber; it was one of the first books he read as he recovered from his depression in 1902.¹⁹⁸ Yet not many have made a more sustained attempt to demonstrate such influence and there are few comparative accounts of the two great early sociologists.¹⁹⁹ This is not the place to remedy this situation, but a brief analysis of Weber and Simmel's unique conceptions of the subjects, tasks, and methods of sociology will serve a dual purpose. First, such a comparison is useful for grounding Simmel's distinct approach and contribution to social theory. Secondly the differences (and similarities) of their approaches to sociology have consequences for their analyses of rationalization and modernity, and thus where they fit into the first and second discourses.

"The Problem of Sociology," published in 1894, is one of Simmel's first discussions of sociology. In it he recounts how he developed his theory of sociology as a unique science. He begins by announcing that:

Society, in its broadest sense, is found wherever several individuals enter into
reciprocal relations [*Wechselwirkung*]. [. . .] The particular causes and aims,

¹⁹⁷ For example David Frisby argues that the second edition of *The Problems of the Philosophy of History* "proved to be a significant source for the development of Max Weber's own methodology of the social sciences" Frisby, *Georg Simmel*, 31. In his work *Roscher and Knies: The Logical Problems of Historical Economics* (published in parts from 1903-1906), Weber acknowledged that Simmel was among the first to work out a theory of interpretation appropriate to the new *Geistgeschichten*. Lichtblau, "Causality or Interaction?," 40. See also Levin's Introduction to Max Weber, *The city* (New York,: Collier Books, 1962). 155; Oakes, "Introduction." And finally, see Faught, "Neglected Affinities: Max Weber and Georg Simmel."

¹⁹⁸ Although critical of what he saw as Simmel's conflation between capitalism and the money economy, Weber praised its "brilliant analysis." David Frisby, "The Ambiguity of Modernity: Georg Simmel and Max Weber," in *Max Weber and His Contemporaries*, ed. Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Jürgen Osterhammel (London ; Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 424.

¹⁹⁹ In addition to the above, see Bryan S. R. Green, *Literary Methods and Sociological Theory : Case Studies of Simmel and Weber* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). And Klaus Lichtblau, *Gesellschaftliche Rationalität Und Individuelle Freiheit. Georg Simmel Und Max Weber Im Vergleich* (Hagen: Fernuniversität, 1988). Lichtblau discusses trends in Weber/Simmel comparisons in Lichtblau, "Causality or Interaction?."

without which socialization [*Vergesellschaftung*] never takes place, comprise, to a certain extent, the body, the material of the social process. That the result of these causes, and the pursuance of these aims call forth, among the persons concerned, a reciprocal relationship, or a socialization [*Vergesellschaftung*], this is the form [*Form*], in which the content of social organization clothes itself.²⁰⁰

Wechselwirkung, variously translated as “reciprocity” or “interaction,” is the key to Simmel’s sociology. “Reciprocal relations” – the give and take between individuals – be it employer and employee, parent and child, two strangers passing each other on the street, or an orator and the masses, are the raw material for what Simmel calls *Vergesellschaftung*. In the above translation from 1895 this term is rendered as “socialization.” “Socialization” is problematic however since today the term refers to a process whereby individuals are “socialized” in the behavioral norms of a specific group. For the last several decades the preferred translation has been the neologism “sociation.”²⁰¹ Awkward though it may be, “sociation” more accurately captures Simmel’s conception of a process that produces an infinite variety of social forms, which are in turn the proper subjects for sociology. The task of the sociologist is to isolate these forms “by means of scientific abstraction.”²⁰² Sociology is not the study of “society,” for “society” is neither a uniform *Gestalt* nor merely a collection of individuals. Simmel explains that it is a fallacy to call the mass “society,” for in so doing, “we do not make

²⁰⁰ Georg Simmel, "The Problem of Sociology," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 6, no. Nov. 1895 (1895): 54. My emphasis. ; Georg Simmel, "Das Problem Der Sociologie " *Schmoller Jahrbuch für Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft* 18 (1894): 273. Hereafter “Das Problem.” Simmel’s “big” sociology, *Soziologie*, which first appeared in 1908, contains a revised version of this essay. Simmel, *Soziologie : Untersuchungen Über Die Formen Der Vergesellschaftung*. English translation of the 1908 essay in Georg Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms; Selected Writings* (Chicago,: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

²⁰¹ For a brief discussion of the translation of these two terms, see Kurt H. Wolff’s introduction to Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, lxiii-lxiv.

²⁰² ———, "The Problem of Sociology," 54. ; “Das Problem,” 273.

the required distinction between that which takes place merely within society, as within a frame, and that which comes to pass through society.”²⁰³ Rather than treat society as a catchall container, Simmelian sociology examines the interactions between individuals and the forms such interactions take as they “pass through society.”

Forms are the essential component of Simmel’s strictly sociological work and to his “tragic” view of modern life, discussed in this chapter’s final section.²⁰⁴ Forms are not exclusive to the discipline of sociology, but are the conceptual tools people use to categorize and understand their social environment. James Bergey adroitly paraphrases Simmel on this point:

Humans do not experience individual or multiple contents as they exist in themselves; rather, we ascribe shape and meaning to them via our psychological experience. This is where “form” enters into play. Forms interpret and categorize content in order to render it immediately recognizable to us.²⁰⁵

Forms make content knowable, but are not themselves content. As Guy Oakes explains: “No conceptual scheme can provide a complete classification of reality. The language of every form is incomplete.”²⁰⁶ Likewise the language of forms is limitless as new forms are always coming into being. For example, marriage is a widely recognized form which has a generally agreed upon meaning and set of associations for most people despite the

²⁰³ Ibid.: 56. ; Ibid., 274.

²⁰⁴ Oakes calls the concept of forms “Simmel’s fundamental methodological instrument.” Oakes, “Introduction,” 8. Different commentators have pointed out similarities between Weber’s “ideal types” and Simmel’s “forms.” However it is important to recognize that forms for Simmel are the actual products of social interaction while Weber’s “ideal types” are strictly methodological tools.

²⁰⁵ James Bergey, “Georg Simmel’s Metropolis: Anticipating the Postmodern,” *Telos* 129, no. Fall-Winter 04 (2004): 139.

²⁰⁶ Oakes, “Introduction,” 14.

variety of individual marriages. At the same time there is no singular “marriage” and marriage is a broad concept that changes over time and cultures.²⁰⁷

Whereas Simmel considers sociology’s essential element to be the analysis of various forms of social interaction, Weber calls the “specific task” of sociology, “the interpretation of action in terms of its subjective meaning.”²⁰⁸ Recall Weber’s definition of social action: “We shall speak of ‘action’ insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his behavior . . . Action is ‘social’ insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course.”²⁰⁹ Yet despite the role personal motivation plays, Weber’s sociology is still essentially top-down. His starting point is always large power structures – economic, ecclesiastic, or political. Individuals follow their own motivations but ascribe meaning to their actions based on social norms and expectations. For Weber action is almost always unidirectional, only the unique and rare “charismatic” personality has a chance of successfully counteracting the power of rationalization, especially as it is embodied in institutions.

In Weber’s analysis rationalization drives the increasing strength and pervasiveness of bureaucratic culture. Means-end rationalization, which favors calculation and quantification as ultimate values, in turn makes bureaucracy a precision tool for domination and control. The advancement of technical knowledge aids in the consolidation of power, it also “disenchants” the world, pushing questions of meaning and ultimate purpose into the realm of the irrational. Means-ends rationality comes to

²⁰⁷ Forms change and new ones emerge, for example from “marriage” comes “same sex domestic partnership.”

²⁰⁸ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 8.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

dominate more and more areas of modern life, with the attendant depersonalization, resulting in “specialists without spirit” enclosed in an iron cage, or “shell as hard as steel [*stahlhartes Gehäuse*].”²¹⁰ To an extent Simmel’s conclusion about these developments shares Weber’s sense of tragic resignation, but his conception of sociation as a process allows him to view the reign of rationalization as less one-sided, and therefore less totalizing.

If Weber is concerned with the *why* behind individual actions, then Simmel is concerned with the *what*, that is what forms actions take. As Simmel explains in “Problem”: “These forms [of sociation] are evolved through contact of individuals, but relatively *independent of the basis of such contact* and their sum make up that concrete thing which we designate by the abstraction—society.”²¹¹ In Simmel’s sociology, discrete actions do not become “social” until they are “crystallized” into forms.²¹² At first glance, this approach may seem to deemphasize the importance of the individual, but Simmel actually affords the individual an essential role in the creation of social forms. Forms are the creation of *all* participating individuals even given significant power differentials among them. In *Money*, Simmel argues that virtually all relationships can be viewed in terms of exchange, with both sides acting as vital, if not necessarily, equal, participants. He writes: “It is often overlooked how much what appears at first as a one-sided activity is actually based upon reciprocity: the orator appears as the leader and inspirer to the

²¹⁰ ———, *Protestant Ethic*, 122.

²¹¹ Simmel, “The Problem of Sociology,” 55. My emphasis. ; “Das Problem,” 273.

²¹² In his final comprehensive statement on sociology, *Grundfragen der Soziologie*, published in 1917, Simmel reiterates that sociology is the study, not of individual drives, but of the forms of sociation *between* individuals: “In themselves, these materials with which life is filled, the motivations by which it is propelled, are not social. [. . .] *They are factors in sociation only when they transform the mere aggregations of isolated individuals into specific forms of being with and for one another*—forms that are subsumed under the general concept of interaction. Sociation this is the form (realized in innumerable, different ways) in which individuals grow together into units that satisfy their interests.” My emphasis. ———, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 40-41.

assembly, the teacher to his class, the journalist to his public; but, in fact, everyone in such a situation feels the decisive and determining reaction of the apparently passive mass.”²¹³ For Simmel, there is not such thing as a “one-sided” social interaction – even between a leader and his followers there exists “reciprocal effect,” which is the literal translation of *Wechselwirkung*.

Where Weber sees distinct categories of social action, Simmel sees a constantly renewing process. Society is born of sociation, the study of which requires a distinct approach. In an essay from *Sociology*, Simmel echoes Weber’s distinction between the social and natural sciences. In “Objectivity” Weber argued that the end goal of social science is not to look for “empirical regularities,” or fixed concepts in its subjects.²¹⁴ Simmel explains that the question of “how society is possible” cannot be answered with “forms of cognition.” He continues:

[Sociology] inquires into the processes—those which, ultimately, take place in the individuals themselves—that condition the existence of individuals as society. It investigates these processes, not as antecedent causes of this result, but as part of the synthesis to which we give the name of “society.”²¹⁵

Society is an always-unfinished project; sociology is the study of the endless syntheses that constitute it.²¹⁶ These syntheses remain “purely psychological” and have “no

²¹³ ———, *Money*, 83. My emphasis. ; Simmel, *Geld*, 33-34.

²¹⁴ Weber, “Objectivity,” 379.

²¹⁵ “How is Society Possible” in Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms; Selected Writings*, 8. ; Simmel, *Soziologie : Untersuchungen Über Die Formen Der Vergesellschaftung*, 44.

²¹⁶ Post-Darwin nature is also an unfinished project; nevertheless for the scientist its categories are relatively fixed. Klaus Christian Kohnke demonstrates the importance of reading Darwin for the young Simmel. Klaus Christian Kohnke, *Der Junge Simmel : In Theoriebeziehungen Und Sozialen Bewegungen*, 1. Aufl. ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996).

parallels with spatial things and their intentions.”²¹⁷ They cohere in shifting forms, but not fixed concepts.

Tapestry of the Transitory

In a “Supplementary Note” to the 1895 English translation of “Problem,” Simmel asserts that the scope of his sociology is in “no sense so narrow” as his critics have charged. The potential subjects for sociology are endless: “The importance, for example, of a common meal-time for the cohesion of individuals is a real sociological theme.”²¹⁸ In the 1910 essay “Sociology of the Meal” Simmel proves this point by demonstrating how the common meal is an ideal subject for exploring the tension between the individual and society that is at the heart of all forms of sociation. For as Simmel argues, eating and drinking is the thing people have most in common, but is, at the same time, “the most egotistical thing, indeed the one most absolutely and immediately confined to the individual.”²¹⁹ People can see and hear the same thing but “what a single individual eats can under no circumstances be eaten by another.” Yet eating as a communal act is shared across time and cultures. The importance of the common meal, combined with the “primitiveness and hence universal nature” of eating, accounts for “the immeasurable sociological significance of the meal.”²²⁰

A “primitive” person consumes food “anarchically” according to his own appetite. The shared meal however demands “temporal regularity” and from this “first

²¹⁷ Ibid., 7. ; Ibid., 43.

²¹⁸ Simmel, “The Problem of Sociology,” 62. This line is taken from a “Supplementary Note” published with the 1895 English translation of “Das Problem”.

²¹⁹ “Sociology of the Meal” in ———, *Simmel on Culture*, 130. Originally published in Georg Simmel, “Soziologie Der Mahlzeit,” *Berliner Tageblatt*, 10 October 1910.

²²⁰ Simmel, *Simmel on Culture*, 130.

triumph over the naturalism of eating,” eventually table manners emerge.²²¹ The highly regulated meal of the upper class demonstrates in miniature the interplay between conformity and individuation. When the act of eating becomes a process of sociation, “a formal norm is placed above the fluctuating needs of the individual.” The regulated table manners of cultured people “appear nimble and free” but they are following a strict set of rules, from how to hold the fork to what topics of conversation are appropriate. Thus the shared meal is “a symbol of the fact that social standardization really only gains its life from the freedom of the individual, a freedom which in this manner reveals itself to be the counterpart of naturalistic individualism.”²²² The ego-driven eating of “naturalistic individualism” functions only to serve a physical need. Modern individualism by contrast requires not absolute conformity, but the adaptation and manipulation of prescribed social norms. Simmel underscores his point with the example of the dinner plate – its closed circularity (in contrast to the communal oval platter) signals its use for one diner alone, while at the same time its uniformity to all other plates on the table indicates strict limits to the assertion of individuality.²²³

“Sociology of the Meal” is exemplary of Simmel’s ability to find deep social meaning in fleeting everyday actions. In the 1907 essay “Sociology of the Senses,” Simmel explains that the power of sociation is observable not just in the obvious places of “states and trade unions, priesthoods and family forms, guild and factory structures” but also in small, everyday acts. He writes: “The current developmental stage of the social sciences appears to correspond to that of the sciences of organic life when they

²²¹ Ibid., 131, 32. The temporal aspect is clear in the German word for meal, *Mahlzeit* – literally “meal time.”

²²² Ibid., 132.

²²³ Ibid., 133.

were characterized by the commencement of microscopic investigation.” The study of the large and definitely separated organs in isolation does not make “the nexus of life comprehensible.” It is only by analyzing the “smallest elements, the cells” and the “ceaseless interactions,” that the biological systems linking the major organs together was made visible. Rather than stay at the level of “structures of a higher order,” Simmel looks for the “pulsating life which links human beings together.”²²⁴

Like the heart and lungs, “states and trade unions” appear to be discrete forms but life, both biological and social, is composed of *movement*. That is why while sociologists study the forms of society, they should resist reifying them, for “every form becomes immediately dissolved in the very moment when it emerges; it lives, as it were, only by being destroyed.”²²⁵ This sense of constant movement characterizes Simmel’s sociology and explains his choice of the money economy and the metropolis -- where goods and people circulate -- as the site of his greatest investigations. For Simmel “the connecting forms” of small interactions are as vital to the “comprehensive organizations” of society as circulation is to the health of the body. Therefore the “fluid” and “transitory” aspects of sociation -- “the fact that people look at and are jealous of one another, that they write each other letters or have lunch together, that they have sympathetic or antipathetic contacts, quite removed from any tangible interest” are all legitimate subjects for sociology.²²⁶ It is these “thousands of relations from person to person” which “continually bind us together.”

Simmel continues: “On every day, at every hour, such threads are spun, dropped, picked up again, replaced by others or woven together with them. Herein lie the

²²⁴ “Sociology of the Senses” in *Ibid.*, 109.

²²⁵ ———, *Money*, 510. ; *Geld*, 583.

²²⁶ “Sociology of the Senses” in ———, *Simmel on Culture*, 110.

interactions between the atoms of society, accessible only to psychological microscopy.”²²⁷ While Weber brilliantly delineates the mechanics of discrete and enduring “major organs and systems,” Simmel’s microscopy by contrast yields a tapestry of the transitory. The two thinkers’ divergent imagery is instructive. Weber’s modern individual exists in a rigid “*stahlhartes Gehäuse*” and Weber does not venture to say what kind of interpersonal relationships the *Gehäuse*’s inhabitant might have. In the place of unyielding steel, Simmel describes individuals wielding threads and embroidering an ever-evolving patchwork of social interaction. In Simmel’s vision, rationalization does not necessarily dominate all areas of existence, and the individual has more space to resist its standardizing effects.

Whereas Weber is most concerned with “big” power as embodied in states and institutions, Simmel considers psychological needs to be as important as physical or economic ones.²²⁸ As Laurence Scaff argues, Simmel was unique among “classical sociologists” because he developed his theory of culture “with the intention of illuminating the modern subject’s inner response to the external, humanly created world of modern culture.”²²⁹ Exploring the immaterial consequences of the material changes brought about by modernity is very much a conscious goal of Simmel’s. In *Money’s* introduction, he explains that *The Philosophy of Money* is meant to “*complement the*

²²⁷ Ibid. : Recall that Weber also referred to the individual as sociology’s “basic unit, as its ‘atom.’” Weber, “Categories,” 158.

²²⁸ Scaff argues “The peculiar and ingenious effect of his [Simmel’s] thinking was achieved by setting material alongside immaterial properties.” Scaff, *Fleeing the Iron Cage*, 193. Scaff also makes this argument in Lawrence A. Scaff, “Georg Simmel’s Theory of Culture,” in *Georg Simmel and Contemporary Sociology*, ed. Michael Kaern, et al. (Dordrecht ; Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990).

²²⁹ Scaff, *Fleeing the Iron Cage*, 193.

position of historical materialism.”²³⁰ In a promotional essay for the book, Simmel explains:

Wherever one can ground aspects of intellectual, moral, religious, or aesthetic experience in the forces and transformations of the material sphere, it is also possible *to excavate a further foundation of the latter, and to grasp the course of history as an interplay of material and ideal factors in which neither is always first and neither always last.* I seek to establish this for the relationships between the forms of the economy with which we are familiar and the sphere of interest making up *internal existence*. In this way, I intended to foster the conviction that from any point on the most indifferent, least idealized *surface of existence* it is possible to plumb its farthest depths; that each of its particular aspects both contains and is contained by the totality of its meaning.²³¹

Simmel does not deny the validity of historical materialism but argues that the “forms and contents of culture” do not rest exclusively on the foundation of “economic relationships.”²³² Simmel excavates one foundation below the material level searching for “spiritual significance.”²³³ Neither the material nor immaterial should be privileged for they work in concert to create the context of modern existence. The “surface” of economic life provides a point of entry where “particular aspects” – social interactions large and small – hold the potential to reveal a “totality” of meaning.

²³⁰ Simmel, *Money*, 56. ; Simmel, *Geld*, VIII.

²³¹ Georg Simmel, "Philosophy of Money," in *Money and the Modern Mind : George Simmel's Philosophy of Money*, ed. Gianfranco Poggi (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 62.

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ *Ibid.*, 63.

Such an approach reveals the “relation between what is most eternal and what is most internal” and ultimately, “*the connections that exist between the money economy and the development of individual freedom.*”²³⁴ The money economy is the “surface” Simmel penetrates to ask what implications modern rationalization has for individual freedom. He looks at one thing – the money economy -- from many directions, including money as “value,” “symbol,” and “tool,” the history of coinage, prostitution, different kinds of labor, credit, dowries, and bribery. If the methodology of the first discourse is top-down, the technique of the second discourse as practiced by Simmel is “outside-in,” moving from the exterior surface to the interior. The second discourse is interested in this “inner response” and the “development of individual freedom” – questions the first discourse does not ask explicitly.

Compare the above passage to Weber’s concluding remarks in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*:

Then, however, it might truly be said of the “last men” in this cultural development: “specialists without spirit, hedonists without a heart, these nonentities imagine they have attained a stage of humankind [*Menschentum*] never before reached.” Here however, *we are getting into the area of judgments of value and belief, with which this purely historical study should not be encumbered. [. . .] it cannot, of course, be our purpose to replace a one-sided “materialist” causal interpretation of culture and history with an equally one-sided spiritual one.*²³⁵

²³⁴ Ibid., 62-63. My emphasis.

²³⁵ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 122. My emphasis.

Weber and Simmel both critique and compliment the Marxian analysis of industrial capitalism – its history, its driving forces, and its effects on societies and individuals in order to “grasp the course of history,” but for Weber this project is still a “purely historical study.” Weber compares states, economic systems, and historical periods. Like Simmel, he offers a spiritual explanation intended to complement and correct, but not replace a materialist one. Yet as bold as his language gets – addressing “spirit” “heart” and “humankind” – Weber ultimately backs off from the realm of “value and belief.” For Simmel by contrast, the “most external” and “most internal” cannot be separated and by revealing their relationship, Simmel shows how rationalization works inside and out.

The Philosophy of Money

By confronting the spiritual consequences of rationalization Simmel goes where Weber fears to tread. Yet he fares less well against Weber when it comes to offering a comprehensive theory of rationalization, industrial capitalism, or bureaucracy. Although he writes about the modern individual, the metropolis, and the money economy as historical developments, Simmel’s historical contextualization is weak to non-existent. For Weber, social actions are always historically and culturally conditioned and he frames his analysis with careful attention to historical context, whether the subject is politics, economics, or religion. Simmel on the other hand indiscriminately pulls examples from past times and different cultures to illuminate, often by way of contrast, a particular phenomenon but then fails to show the historical developments behind these differences. While Simmel understands the unequal struggle between what he identifies as subjective and objective culture – which he sees as the essential feature of modernity –

to be intensified by modern conditions, he does not treat it as the product of any specific development, such as industrial capitalism.²³⁶ Yet despite its shortcomings as a historical account, *Money* offers a powerful account of modern means-ends rationalization.²³⁷

A “money economy” is simply an economic system based on the exchange of currency rather than the barter of goods. In Simmel’s hands, money in its modern form – paper and metal currency, the materials of which have no intrinsic value – becomes the most ideal subject for the study of the effects rationalization has on society and the individual. As Elizabeth Goodstein puts it, in *The Philosophy of Money*, Simmel “turns rationalization into a plastic category of analysis.”²³⁸ For Simmel, rationalization is not only the culmination of complex historical development, but also a force that colors everyday life and individual consciousness. As “both agent and consequence” of modernization the money economy embodies and engenders the essential traits of rationalization: calculation, abstraction, and the elevation of means over ends, all resulting in depersonalization and, ultimately, fragmentation of the self.²³⁹ At the same time money is a source of freedom, albeit, of a very complicated kind.

Simmel shows how the money economy puts calculation at the forefront of the modern mind. He writes: “The lives of many people are absorbed by such evaluating, weighing, calculating and reducing of qualitative values to quantitative ones.”²⁴⁰ The reduction of the qualitative to the quantitative is a process of objectification which in turn

²³⁶ In fact, Simmel lacks an overall theory of capitalist development, quite remarkable for someone who wrote a 500 page book on money.

²³⁷ For an outline of the book and an overview of Simmel’s argument, see Poggi, *Money and the Modern Mind*.

²³⁸ Elizabeth S. Goodstein, "Style as Substance: Georg Simmel's Phenomenology of Culture," *Cultural Critique* 52, no. Fall (2002): 223. “The conditions of metropolitan life are at both once cause and effect of this [calculation] trait.” Simmel, "Metropolis," 412. ; Simmel, “Großtädte,” 119.

²³⁹ Again the phrasing is Goodstein’s. Goodstein, "Style," 213.

²⁴⁰ Simmel, *Money*, 44. ; Simmel, *Geld*, 499.

encourages depersonalization: “Money objectifies the external activities of the subject which are represented in general by economic transactions, and money has therefore developed as its content the most objective practices, the most logical, purely mathematical norms, the *absolute freedom from everything personal*.”²⁴¹ Money quantifies the quality of activity (“the activities of the subject”) by measuring time (as in wage labor), not the products of labor themselves. Increasingly those products most essential to the physical maintenance of the subject – food, shelter, clothing – are paid for with indifferent cash. With its purely objectified content, the role of money is not mitigated by the ends for which it is employed. Who spends money and to what purpose is irrelevant to its function. Money’s neutrality and its freedom from any “relation to particular interests” or “specific purpose” is the source of its utility and what makes it “the means [*Mittel*] *par excellence*.”²⁴²

In the money economy interaction, which is the essential process of sociation, is objectified. Money has value only because everyone believes it does. At the same time money is completely impersonal, we do not ask who or why – only “how much?” “Whatever is sold for money goes to the buyer who offers most for it, quite regardless of what or who he is.”²⁴³ The use-value of money does not change based on the social status of those who possesses it or how it was obtained. Money is the great equalizer: like bureaucracy, money ignores older hierarchies and other relationships based on non-calculable factors.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 128. My emphasis. ; Simmel, *Geld*, 97.

²⁴² Ibid., 212. ; Ibid., 208.

²⁴³ Ibid., 436. ; Ibid., 488.

Bureaucracy is not a word Simmel uses frequently, but his analysis of the money economy describes a bureaucratized culture.²⁴⁴

The automatic character of modern machinery is the result of a highly advanced breakdown and specialization of materials and energies, akin to the character of a highly developed state administration which can evolve only on the basis of an elaborate division of labor among its functionaries. In that the machine becomes a totality and carries out a growing proportion of the work itself, it confronts the worker as an autonomous power, just as he too is no longer an individual personality but merely someone who carries out an objectively prescribed task.²⁴⁵

Modern machinery is powered by a series of discrete actions rather than the conscious direction of an individual. Technology functions, much like a “highly developed state administration” (or bureaucracy) and renders “individual personality” superfluous. The division of labor requires people to serve as functions, not individuals. As work becomes specialized a single worker participates in only a small part of the production process and even then only by performing a task that by design could just as easily be filled by another. It becomes increasingly difficult for the worker to bring to bear his whole personality on his work or recognize himself in the final product. His identity becomes split between his working and non-working self. In a more traditional economy, the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker lived their identities everyday. Wage workers by contrast fulfill a predetermined function for eight to twelve hours and then

²⁴⁴ Simmel does touch on bureaucracy briefly in the 1908 essay “How is Society Possible?” writing: “A bureaucracy consists of a certain order of positions, of a predetermined system of functions. It exists as an ideal structure, irrespective of the particular occupants of these positions. Every new entrant finds within it a clearly defined place which has waited for him, so to speak, and to which his individual talents must but suited.” In ———, *On Individuality and Social Forms; Selected Writings*, 19-20.

²⁴⁵ ———, *Money*, 459. ———, *Geld*, 518.

only live their “personalities” in their off hours. This situation contributes to the process which Simmel calls “fragmentation.”²⁴⁶

To call something “fragmented” implies that it was once whole, or at least has the potential to be whole. Simmel explains, “the inner wholeness of the self basically evolves out of interaction with the uniformity and the completion of our life task.” However he fails to provide theoretical grounding for this assertion, citing only what “experience seems to show” and noting, “it has been emphasized often enough that the product is completed at the expense of the development of the producer.”²⁴⁷ Simmel is not really concerned with how or why fragmentation has come about historically, instead he wants to understand what it means for contemporary individuals. While he writes: “Whenever our energies do not produce something whole as a reflection of the total personality, then the proper relationship between subject and object is missing,” he does not indicate what “the proper relationship” is or if it is even achievable. Rather Simmel describes the unequal interplay between subjective and objective forces that constitutes his version of ‘alienated labor.’

The internal nature of our achievement is bound up with parts of achievements accomplished by others which are a necessary part of the totality, but it does not refer back to the producer. As a result, the inadequacy that develops between the worker’s existential form and that of his product because of greater specialization easily serves to completely *divorce the product from the laborer*. Its meaning is

²⁴⁶ The split between working and non-working selves was important to Marx’s theory of alienated labor as outlined in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, where he wrote: “The workers therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself.” Simmel was of course unaware of these manuscripts, as they were not published until 1932. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2d ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), 74. For the theme of fragmentation, see Frisby, *Fragments*

²⁴⁷ We can guess that Marx was the one doing the “emphasizing,” but Simmel does not say.

not derived from the mind of the producer but from its relationship with production of a different origin. Because of its *fragmentary* character, the product lacks the spiritual determinacy that can be easily perceived in a product of labor that is wholly the work of a *single* person. The significance of the product is thus to be sought neither in the reflection of a subjectivity nor in the reflex of a creative spirit, but is to be found only in the *objective achievement that leads away from the subject*.²⁴⁸

The division of labor allows the production process to become more complex and multifaceted, while at the same time the contribution of each individual producer becomes more narrow and simpler. Each individual worker's achievement is necessary to the "totality" – the finished product – but the product itself does not reflect the contribution of any single personality. If the carpenter can see in a hand-carved chair both his physical and mental labor – preparing and shaping the wood in a design of his own invention, perhaps for a client of his personal acquaintance – the modern factory worker sees his "objective achievement" disappear into a "production of a different origin" that necessarily "leads away from the subject" – that is, himself.²⁴⁹ Here Simmel echoes Marx, who wrote that, in the capitalist system of production, "Labor's realization is its objectification."²⁵⁰

Money frees us from other people, and "lends the individual a new independence from group interests," but because money objectifies, the freedom it provides is what

²⁴⁸ Simmel, *Money*, 454. My emphasis. ; Simmel, *Geld*, 512.

²⁴⁹ Simmel provides an example of the objectification of the labor process in *On Social Differentiation* "a woman working at an embroidering machine is engaged in a much more mindless activity than an embroideress; the intellectual element of the activity has been taken over by the machine and objectified in it." ———, *Georg Simmel : Sociologist and European*, 108.

²⁵⁰ Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 71.

Simmel calls a “negative” kind. However he does not mean this in the pejorative sense, but because it is “freedom *from* something, not liberty *to do* something.” It is empty, “without any definite and determining content.” Simmel describes “the peasant who has been bought out, the merchant who has become a rentier or the pensioned civil servant” as having “exchanged the positive contents of their self for money,” which is itself empty of content.”²⁵¹ Yet the objectification of labor and the detachment of economic processes from “the immediacy of personal interests” is also, for Simmel, if not for Marx, a positive development for the individual. Simmel explains that under these conditions: “the personal element becomes more and more independent, the individual becomes capable of developing more independently, not of his economic situation as a whole but of the *a priori* factors that determine it.”²⁵² The independence of the “personal element” from production means the individual gains more freedom for the cultivation of his own personality. This does not mean the individual can will himself free of his “economic situation,” but that the “*a priori*” factors that determine it – such as class, family, and gender -- have less power. Simmel shows that by severing old communal ties and generally disrupting tradition, the money economy contributes to the development of individual freedom. In more traditional communal associations, the personality merges with the group; in the money economy, individuals are responsible for their own development.²⁵³

Individuals also enjoy greater flexibility as consumers:

²⁵¹ Simmel, *Money*, 402. ; Simmel, *Geld*, 449. “Money means more to us than any other object of possession because it obeys us without reservation – and it means less to us because it lacks any content that might be appropriated beyond the mere form of possession.” Simmel, *Money*, 325. ; Simmel, *Geld*, 325.

²⁵² Simmel, *Money*, 332. Simmel, *Geld*, 359.

²⁵³ “Money in Modern Culture” (1896) ———, *Simmel on Culture*, 244. My emphasis.

Whereas in the period prior to the emergence of a money economy, the individual was directly dependent upon his group and the exchange and services united everyone closely with the whole of society, today everyone carries around with him, in a condensed latent form, his claim to the achievements of others.

Everyone has a choice of deciding when and where he wants to assert this claim.²⁵⁴

While the barter economy is largely based on personal connections, the money economy dissolves the “interdependence of personality and material relationships.”²⁵⁵ We are less dependent on any single person, instead of specific individuals, we seek functions, as indifferent money allows us to lay claim to the “achievements of others.” Yet we pay for our liberty to change economic relations at will when we too are viewed with “indifference” and treated only as functions.²⁵⁶

The freedom provided by the money economy is also qualified because it is contingent on a new kind of dependency. While the individual is granted independence from specific individuals, he is at the same time bound to an innumerable number of strangers. For in the money economy “the satisfaction of one person is always mutually dependent upon another person.”²⁵⁷ Simmel describes this situation as “the lengthening of the teleological chain” and cites it as a prime marker of modernity.

The difference between primitive and cultivated conditions is measured by the number of links that lie between the immediate action and its ultimate end. [. . .]

The progress of the public spirit therefore indicates the *increase of institutions*

²⁵⁴ ———, *Money*, 342. ; *Geld*, 371.

²⁵⁵ “Money in Modern Culture” (1896) in ———, *Simmel on Culture*, 244.

²⁵⁶ ———, *Money*, 297-98. ; *Geld*, 314.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 156. ; *Ibid.*, 134.

through which the individual can achieve, at least indirectly, those ends which it is difficult or improbable for him or her to attain directly. Every tool which allows the strength of the human hand to achieve an effect in an indirect manner and through transformations which would be denied it through direct impact on the object to be shaped, every legal institution which guarantees to the declared will of a person a consequence which he or she would never have been able to achieve through his or her own strength, every religious sentiment which the individual does not believe he or she is able to find by him or herself – all of these are instances of the deepening of the teleological process outlined above, as the public spirit creates this process when *the disproportion between that which the individual wants and that which he or she can achieve as an individual requires detours which only the general community can make passable*. Every uniform and generally recognized means of exchange offers an instance of the lengthening of the teleological chain [*teleologischenketten*].²⁵⁸

Modern “cultivated conditions” enable individuals to achieve higher, more complex ends by multiplying the strength of the human hand, making possible a civil society, which ensures legal rights regardless of status, and by offering rationalized paths to salvation. At the same time however these advances create “disproportion” between what individuals want (and wants generally increase in modern economies) and what they can

²⁵⁸ “On the Psychology of Money” (1889), 233-234. This early version of *Money* is translated by Mark Ritter and David Frisby in ———, *Simmel on Culture*. My emphasis. ; Georg Simmel, *Aufsätze Und Abhandlungen, 1894 Bis 1900 Band 2*, ed. Heinz-Jürgen Dahme and David Frisby, 1. Aufl. ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), 49-50. Simmel uses similar language in the opening to *Nietzsche and Schopenhauer*. See Georg Simmel, *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*, trans. Loiskandl et. al. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986).

secure by themselves. Not only is the extent of our needs considerably wider, but even the elementary necessities that we have in common with all other human beings (food, clothing and shelter) can be satisfied only with the help of a much more complex organization and many more hands. With the rise of science and technology, “the practical world too increasingly becomes a problem for the intelligence,” and individuals lose essential knowledge about how to satisfy basic needs.²⁵⁹ Rather than grow our food or construct our own shelter, there are more and more layers between us and the products of our consumption. The specialization of activities requires an infinitely extended range of other producers with whom we exchange products, and direct action itself is dependent upon a growing amount of preparatory work, additional help and semi-finished products. The distance modern individuals experience as consumers (between what they consume on a daily basis and its production) is mirrored in their role as producers. Specialization means that the ends of a single laborer’s actions are out of view. In Chapter Four I will discuss how some thinkers argue this feature of the bureaucratic process is key to understanding the perpetration of the Holocaust.

The lengthening of the chain between means and ends is made possible by the constant circulation of cash. This endless series of exchanges creates the experience of modernity as one of both fluidity and fragmentation:

The contents of life, as they become more and more expressible in money which is absolutely continuous, rhythmical and indifferent to any distinctive form – are, as it were, split up into so many small parts; their rounded totalities are so shattered that any arbitrary synthesis and formation of them is possible. It is this

²⁵⁹ Simmel, *Money*, 431. ; Simmel, *Geld*, 483.

process that provides the material for modern individualism and the abundance of its products.²⁶⁰

Money frees “the contents of life” from specific contexts, allowing goods and services to travel far from their origins. Even ancient cultural practices can be adapted and commodified to satisfy new markets, as when non-Hindus practice yoga. Yet as contents are uprooted and reassembled they are subject to “the most frightful” leveling.

Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” can appear in the form of a penny novel. A wax record can play a bawdy folk song just as well as a Beethoven Symphony.

Eventually:

Money, with all its colorlessness and indifference, becomes the common denominator of all values; irreparably it hollows out the core of things, their individuality, their specific value, and their incomparability. All things float with equally specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money.²⁶¹

Freed from traditional economies, modern individuals also swim in the “moving stream of money.” As “the firm delineations within the respective social group become more and more fluid [. . .] the personality can circulate through a diversity of ways of life.”²⁶² The economic and social fluidity engendered by the money economy “provides the material for modern individualism.” This process is most visible in the “seat” of the money economy – the modern metropolis.²⁶³

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 276. ; Ibid., 290.

²⁶¹ ———, “Metropolis,” 414. -----, “Großtädte,” 415. This passage resonates with a famous passage from *The Communist Manifesto* (1848): “All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their taint of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air.” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto : With Related Documents*, ed. John Edward Toews (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999), 68.

²⁶² “On the Psychology of Money” (1889) in Simmel, *Simmel on Culture*, 242-43.

²⁶³ ———, “Metropolis,” 411.

“The Metropolis and Mental Life”

Originally conceived as a lecture for the opening of a museum exhibit on the modern German city, arguably no work of Simmel’s has been read and cited more than his 1903 essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life.” “Metropolis” manages, in just over a dozen pages, to illuminate themes that dominate Simmel’s larger oeuvre -- the division of labor, the dominance of objective culture and the resistance of subjective culture, and the circulation of people, ideas, and money.²⁶⁴ For Simmel, the modern metropolis, which demands both conformity and distinction, is the ideal setting for the struggle between objective and subjective culture and the tension between them is the implicit theme of “Metropolis’s” opening:

The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life [*Technik des Lebens*]. The fight with nature which primitive man has to wage for his bodily existence attains in this modern form its latest transformation.²⁶⁵

Such “social forces” include “language,” “law,” “technique[s] of production,” “art,” “science,” and even “objects of the domestic environment,” all of which have increasingly specialized knowledge embodied in them.²⁶⁶ Technological advancements

²⁶⁴ In “Metropolis’s” only footnote, Simmel writes: “The content of this lecture by its very nature does not derive from a citable literature. Argument and elaboration of its major cultural-historical ideas are contained in my *Philosophie des Geldes*.” In other words, his views on the metropolis rest on his understanding of rationalization and the money economy. *Ibid.*, 424.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 409. ; Simmel, “Grosstädte,” 116.

²⁶⁶ Simmel, “Metropolis,” 421. ; Simmel, “Großstädte,” 129.

and the expansion of trade guarantee for a large class of western urban-dwellers the security of their “bodily existence.” But this relative physical comfort is coupled with an essential dependence. As we have seen these modern improvements lengthen the chain between needs and their satisfaction, leaving the individual dependent on the expertise of countless others for daily necessities. Modern man is engaged in a fight for the “autonomy and individuality of his existence.” The arena for this struggle is the modern metropolis.²⁶⁷

Beginning with Simmel the urban environment becomes the “natural” text for the study of modernity.²⁶⁸ Decades after Simmel’s death, preeminent urban theorist David Harvey writes:

Capitalism these last two hundred years has produced through its dominant form of urbanization, not only a ‘second nature’ of built environments even harder to transform than the virgin nature of frontier regions years ago, but also an *urbanized human nature*, endowed with a very specific sense of time, space, and money as sources of social power and with *sophisticated abilities and strategies to win back from one corner of urban life what may be lost in another*. And while it may be true that some are losers everywhere, *the vast majority find at least*

²⁶⁷ Roger Nisbet writes: “The direction of history is toward metropolis, which for Simmel is the structure of modernism, performing for his thought the role that democracy does for Tocqueville, capitalism for Marx, and bureaucracy for Weber.” Robert A. Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (New York,: Basic Books, 1966), 308.

²⁶⁸ In his introduction to the collection *Simmel on Culture*, David Frisby notes: “Significantly, in the context of social theory, it is the metropolis, rather than the industrial enterprise or production or rational organization, that is a key site of modernity. David Frisby “Introduction to the Texts” in Simmel, *Simmel on Culture*, 12. For a discussion of this essay in the context of Simmel other urban work, see “The City Interpreted” in David Frisby, *Cityscapes of Modernity : Critical Explorations* (Cambridge ; Malden, MA: Polity Press in association with Blackwell, 2001).

minor compensations somewhere while the rest find solace and hope in the intricacy of the game.²⁶⁹

Simmel was one of the first to study the “game” of urban life as well as point to the role of consumption in providing “minor compensations.” His investigations of self-fashioning and fashion itself shows how individuals might “win back” some of the power they lose in the modern metropolis. “Metropolis” also introduces the idea of a “second nature” required to live in the city successfully. In language bordering on the Darwinian, Simmel describes the cultivation of a reserved, “blasé” attitude as a necessary adaptation to city living.

In contrast to the more historically astute Weber, Simmel is not really concerned with why the metropolis exists in the form it does. He mentions “primitive man” but fails to sketch a line from past to present. Nevertheless he does see the metropolis as a uniquely modern development and contrasts it with earlier, rural-based society. In Simmel’s characterization, the social and labor patterns of rural life (both past and present) are relatively static and revolve around a tight-knit community. By contrast the city-dweller is presented with so many rapidly changing images and possibilities he has to actively shut them out, becoming indifferent and withdrawn. At the same time he is free of communal ties and obligations, free to negotiate the city at will.

With each crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life, the city sets up a deep contrast with small town and rural life with reference to the sensory foundations of psychic life. [. . .

Metropolitan man] develops an organ protecting him [*Schutzorgan*] against

²⁶⁹ David Harvey, *Consciousness and the Urban Experience : Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization* (Baltimore, Md.: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), 35. My emphasis.

threatening currents and discrepancies of his external environment which would uproot him. *He reacts with his head instead of his heart.*²⁷⁰

The metropolitan individual must discriminate – he simply cannot expend the energy to assimilate and react to all that occurs around him and adopts a “blasé” [*Blasierheit*] attitude to cope with the many demands on his attention.²⁷¹ This stance allows the individual to gloss over the multiple stimuli of the metropolis, not just the speed and noise of city life, but the uniquely urban problem of being physically close to so many strangers. Metropolitan man has to be cold (Simmel calls this “reserve”); he cannot afford to form attachments with everyone he meets. It is the blasé attitude that allows passengers to stare at each other from opposite sides of the tramcar and never say a word.

The blasé or “matter of fact” [*Sachlichkeit*] attitude is aligned with the driving force of the modern metropolis — the money economy. The operational logic demanded by the metropolis requires the individual adopt a calculating attitude that engages the “head instead of the heart.”²⁷² This “dominance of the intellect” [*Verstandesherrschaft*] is in sharp contrast to the rural past where economic exchange, often between neighbors, was “beyond a mere objective balancing of service and return.”²⁷³ In the metropolis relationships between people are excised of emotion – they are rationalized.

Traditionally, “all intimate emotional relations between persons are founded in their individuality,” but “in rational relations man is reckoned with like a number.”²⁷⁴

Individuals push back against this reckoning by exaggerating their uniqueness and promoting their own personalities. As the division of labor makes workers as

²⁷⁰ Simmel, “Metropolis,” 410. My emphasis. ; Simmel, “Großstädte,” 117.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 413-14. ; *Ibid.*, 117.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 410. *Ibid.*, 117.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 411. ; *Ibid.*, 118.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 412. ; *Ibid.*, 118.

interchangeable as machine parts, Simmel argues that they must search for ways to reestablish individual difference – a response made both necessary and possible by the conditions of the rationalized money economy. At the opening of his essay, Simmel explains that “Metropolis” is an “enquiry into the meaning of specifically modern life and its products” which “must seek to solve the equation which structures like the metropolis set up between the individual and the supra-individual contents of life.”²⁷⁵ Simmel notes again and again (in a tone that recalls Freud) that the conflict between the individual and society is essential, unavoidable, and unsolvable. The conditions of modernity intensify this conflict while at the same time offering more ways to negotiate it, so that the city is at once the site of “the highest impersonality” and where “a highly personal subjectivity” is promoted.²⁷⁶

Simmel describes a “universal historical correlation between the enlargement of the social circle” and “personal inner and outer freedom, which “has made the metropolis the locale of freedom.”²⁷⁷ However this freedom “is not to be understood only in the negative sense of mere freedom of mobility and elimination of prejudices and petty philistinism.”²⁷⁸ It is not simply given – it must be asserted. Simmel continues:

The essential point is that the particularity and incomparability, which ultimately every human being possesses, be somehow expressed in the working-out of a way of life [*der Gestaltung des Lebens*]. That we follow the laws of our nature—and

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 409. ; Ibid., 116.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 415. ; Ibid., 121. Simmel makes a similar point in *Money*: “the enlargement of the group goes hand in hand with the individualization and independence of its individual members.” Simmel, *Money*, 346. ; Simmel, *Geld*, 377.

²⁷⁷ Simmel, “Metropolis,” 418-19. Simmel, “Großstädte,” 126.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 419-420. ; Ibid., 127.

this after all is freedom -- becomes obvious and convincing to ourselves and to others only if the expressions of this nature differ from the expression of others.²⁷⁹

Simmel argues that we experience freedom only by recognizing ourselves as specific, free individuals amongst others. We assert our specificity by “working-out” our own “way of life.” Although Simmel characterizes this impulse as following “the laws of our nature,” it is hardly “natural.” “Nature” in this context becomes something we express while considering other people’s reactions to it – it becomes self-conscious, *unnatural*. The need for self-differentiation is a historical product, only becoming acute in the modern urban setting. Moreover, this freedom needs to be acknowledged by others.²⁸⁰ As Birgitta Nedelmann explains, individuality “is not identical with idiosyncrasy and isolation,” but must be “authenticated.” She continues: “The metropolis is the social marketplace in which individuals struggle for social recognition of their personalities.”²⁸¹

Simmel allows that the variety of “stimulations, interests, [and] uses of time and consciousness” offered by the metropolitan marketplace make the development of personality (and its recognition by others) “infinitely easier.” These offerings “carry the person as if on a stream, and one needs hardly to swim for oneself.” Yet to resist being overtaken by the “fullness of crystallized and impersonalized spirit,” the individual must assert his own uniqueness and particularity “in order to remain audible even to

²⁷⁹ Simmel, "Metropolis," 419-20. ; *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁸⁰ In a promotional essay for *Money*, Simmel writes: “freedom is not simply isolation, rather it is an utterly specific social relation: it is necessary that others should exist and be perceived if one is to feel positively free with respect to them.” Translated by Poggi and included in his book. Poggi, *Money and the Modern Mind*, 66.

²⁸¹ Birgitta Nedelmann, "On the Concept of 'Erleben' in Georg Simmel's Sociology," in *Georg Simmel and Contemporary Sociology*, ed. Michael Kaern, et al. (Dordrecht ; Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), 234.

himself.”²⁸² Such a development is necessary as a defense to mitigate the “atrophy of individual culture” in the face of “the hypertrophy of objective culture.”

The metropolis is at once the place that allows and demands the creation of individual personalities, even as it undermines them. Simmel concludes his essay by citing “the most profound reason” the metropolis “conduces the urge for the most individual personal existence” -- the dominance of the “objective” spirit over the “subjective spirit.”²⁸³ The “tragic” interplay between subjective and objective culture are essential to Simmel’s philosophy and appear throughout his many texts. In “Metropolis” he describes this struggle with powerful phrasing: “The individual has become a mere cog [*einem Staubkorn*] in an enormous organization of things and powers which tear from his hands all progress, spirituality, and value in order to transform them from their *subjective* form into the form of a purely *objective* life.”²⁸⁴ On the one hand Simmel recognizes that all cultural production is based on the transformation of subjective energies into objective products. This is the ‘nature’ of a process that is explicitly ‘unnatural’ but rather human, or cultural (not *natürlich* but *geistig*). Without the forms of objective culture – such as language and technology – our subjective energies – our personality – could not be realized. However in the modern age, objective culture – the enormous organization of things and powers – has become so complex that the subjective self is broken up into so many fragments. “Spirituality,” un-tethered from communal

²⁸²Simmel, "Metropolis," 422. ; Simmel, "Großtädte," 430. For commentary on this theme see Charles Camic, *Reclaiming the Sociological Classics: The State of the Scholarship* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 247.

²⁸³ Simmel, "Metropolis," 421. ; Simmel, "Großtädte," 129.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 422. : Simmel, "Grosstädte," 129-30. My emphasis. The literal translation of “a mere cog” is “a single dust particle.” The original German phrasing arguably renders the individual even more insignificant as a “mere speck of dust” is not essential to the creation of the finished product, whereas as a “cog” might be. Edward A. Shils also uses “cog” in his 1948 translation, reprinted in Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms; Selected Writings*, 337.

traditions and authority, is overwhelming in its complexity and variety, and “value,” measured by the most abstract of phenomenon – money – becomes empty of positive content. In the 1912 essay, “The Concept and Tragedy of Culture,” Simmel writes that the “endless process between the subject and object” begins when humans, in contrast to animals, confront the “natural facticity” [*Gegebenheit*] of the world as an other.²⁸⁵ If the carpenter saw his labor transformed into objective form – he still recognized the product as an extension of himself. The modern laborer by contrast is “a mere cog.”

Yet Simmel accepts this troubling condition as a necessary product of “our time” where the “carrier of man’s values is no longer the ‘general human being’ in every individual, but rather man’s qualitative uniqueness and irreplaceability.” Self-differentiation is a necessary defense under the division of labor and Simmel credits the metropolis as providing “the arena for this struggle and its reconciliation [*Einigungsversuche*].”²⁸⁶ Simmel does not indicate what form such reconciliation might take. He ends “Metropolis” by saying: “it is not our task either to accuse or to pardon, but only to understand.”²⁸⁷ However his discussion of this struggle in other places suggests that reconciliation is not possible. “The Tragedy of Culture” and related pieces distill the position Simmel takes in much of his work – that the conflict between subjective and objective culture will never cease because the creation of culture depends on the ongoing and unequal struggle between these two elements. To solve the conflict would erase the

²⁸⁵ Georg Simmel, “The Concept and Tragedy of Culture,” in *Simmel on Culture : Selected Writings*, ed. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: SAGE, 1997), 55. Hereafter “Tragedy.” ; “Der Begriff und die Tragödie der Kultur” in Georg Simmel, *Philosophische Kultur: Gesammelte Essays* (Berlin: Wegembach, 1998), 195. Hereafter “Tragödie.” In *Money*, Simmel writes: “The awareness of being a subject is already an objectification. This is a basic feature of the mind in its form as personality,” Simmel, *Money*, 64. ; Simmel, *Geld*, 10.

²⁸⁶ Simmel, “Metropolis,” 423. -----, “Großstädte,” 131.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 424. ; *Ibid.*, 131.

conditions that allow for the emergence of the modern ‘free’ individual – hence the “tragic” nature of cultural, and individual, development.

II. The Individual: Simmel’s “Unity of Meaning”

The Individual versus Fragmenting Rationalization

The tragic struggle between subjective and objective culture is essential to Simmel’s vision.²⁸⁸ However, the component parts of this dualism do not simply act for and against each other but are mutually dependent interactions which create society, culture, and individualism. It is crucial to understand Simmel’s vision of culture and the conflict between its subjective and objective components because this is what allows him to connect the greatest developments of modern life with the process of individuation on the everyday level. This dialectical vision provides Simmel with a thread, to use a metaphor he often employed, between the high and the low, the eternal and the everyday. The large-scale tragedy of culture is reproduced in the individual; as Simmel wrote in one of his last essays: “The struggle between life and form” is also “fought out as a struggle

²⁸⁸ To a large degree Simmel sees this “tragedy” as inherent in civilization as culture itself depends on this culture. K. Peter Etzkorn offers a strong defense of this view: “In Simmel’s dialectic, man is always in danger of being slain by those objects of his own creation which have lost their original human coefficient. This process, however, always occurs for Simmel within the framework of social relations regardless of specific historical periods. The dialectic is neither characteristic of capitalism, nor of socialism, nor of liberal democracy, it is much more. For Simmel, this dialectic between life and more-than-life represents the very nature of human existence, the very destiny of civilization.” Translator’s introduction to Georg Simmel, *The Conflict in Modern Culture, and Other Essays* (New York,: Teachers College Press, 1968), 2. Guy Oakes takes a similar position: “the property of tragedy can be ascribed to phenomena only when the following condition is satisfied: the force that destroys life is created by the immanent necessities of life itself. In the final analysis, therefore, the tragic conflict between life and the world is an instance of self contradiction. According to Simmel, all cultural forms are involved in this conflict. In other words, culture is inherently tragic because forms, which become juxtaposed to the energies and interests of life, are necessary products of the process of life.” Oakes, “Introduction,” 40.

between individuality and standardization.”²⁸⁹ The ammunition for the individual’s defense is provided by the “freedom” he gains in the money economy. This freedom is exercised partly through increased opportunities for consumption, which also provide compensation for the more distressing aspects of the money economy. However because he sees the tragic interplay between subjective and objective culture as embedded in the processes of individuation and sociation themselves Simmel is unable to suggest what, if any, kind of political action might alleviate this struggle.

In Simmel’s philosophy the counterpart to the sociological categories of form and content are objective and subjective culture. The content of sociology -- social interactions -- are only analyzable in the forms, or sociations, they pass through. Such forms can be large or small, fleeting or enduring, from “the temporary aggregation of hotel guests to the intimate bond of the medieval guild.”²⁹⁰ For Simmel “culture” itself is the product of the interactions between these two elements. Through acts of sociation, individuals (subjective) produce the social forms (objective) which create the experience of society. Individuals in turn draw from objective culture for their own personal development.²⁹¹ In the 1908 essay, “On the Essence of Culture,” Simmel provides an example of this process: “forms of etiquette; refinement of taste revealed in critical judgment; the acquisition of tact, making the individual an agreeable member of society – all these are forms of culture which take the process of perfection into real and ideal

²⁸⁹ “The Conflict in Modern Culture” (1918) in Simmel, *Simmel on Culture*, 87. ; Georg Simmel, *Gesamtausgabe Band 16* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), 168.

²⁹⁰ “The Problem of Sociology” (1908) in Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms; Selected Writings*, 24. ; Simmel, *Soziologie : Untersuchungen Über Die Formen Der Vergesellschaftung*, 18.

²⁹¹ Donald N. Levine, "Introduction," in *On Individuality and Social Forms; Selected Writings* (Chicago,: University of Chicago Press, 1971), xix.

spheres beyond the individual.”²⁹² An individual who displays proper manners is performing actions which follow from a particular ideal of civilization but which have real consequences. Because these spheres are the product of several different strands of customs and conventions, they lay outside the influence of a single individual, hence they are “objective.”

As Simmel explains in “Tragedy,” culture relies on both “the subjective soul” and “the objective intellectual product” – “neither of which contains culture in itself.”²⁹³

Despite this mutual dependence however “there emerges a split within this structure of culture, one that is in fact *already located in its foundations*, and which turns the subject-object synthesis – the metaphysical meaning of its concept – into a paradox, indeed, into a tragedy.”²⁹⁴ The roots of this tragedy begin with the basic process of cognition.

Objective culture is not the same thing as “nature” for nature exists as “a continuous interdependent totality.” Nature becomes “objectively delineated” only when “our human categories cut individual pieces out of it.”²⁹⁵ In order to be intelligible to us, life, both biological and social, demands form, but forms run counter to life with “its surging dynamism, its temporal fortunes, the inexorable differentiation of all its elements.” “Life” Simmel concludes, “Is ineluctably condemned to become reality only in the guise of its opposite, that is a *form*.”²⁹⁶

²⁹² “On the Essence of Culture” (1908) in Simmel, *Simmel on Culture*, 43-43. ; “Von Wesen der Kultur” in Georg Simmel, *Gesamtausgabe Band 8* (Frankfurt Am Main: Suhrkamp: 1993), 367-68. Simmel makes a similar point in “Tragedy”: “Those objectively intellectual constructs of which I spoke initially – art and morality, science and practical objects, religion and the law, technology and social norms – are stations through which the human subject must pass in order to acquire the specific personal value know as its culture.” Simmel, “Tragedy,” 57-58. ; “Tragödie,” 198.

²⁹³ Simmel, “Tragedy,” 58. ; Simmel, “Tragödie,” 198.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 66. My emphasis. ; *Ibid.*, 208-209.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.; *Ibid.*, 201-202.

²⁹⁶ “The Conflict in Modern Culture” (1908) in ———, *Simmel on Culture*, 89-90. ; “Der Konflikt der Modernen Kultur” in Simmel, *Gesamtausgabe Band 16*, 172.

As individuals we experience this tragic paradox in our own “psychological process.” For we find that our thought is connected to immovable “logical norms,” our hearts “to moral ones,” and that “the entire course of our consciousness is filled up with knowledge, “which constitute the contents of objective culture. These logical and moral norms, knowledge and tradition crystallize with a “solidity” that confronts the “restless dynamism of the subjective psychological process.”²⁹⁷

In modern societies the products of culture are so highly developed, complex, and far from their origins, they appear to us with “almost chemical insolubility,” rigidly impervious to our influence.²⁹⁸ Culture is a product of both subjective and objective energies. Yet while the individual depends on the objective forms of culture for his or her own development, objective culture does not depend on any specific individual and can become substantially (though not completely) independent of subjective culture.²⁹⁹ Just as industrialization increases the complexity of material production, in the modern age cultural production also becomes so complex it achieves “its own kind of independent existence” as its products “follow more and more obediently their own inner logic.” Ultimately subjective culture cannot keep up with the “objective realm” which benefits from the “innumerable contributors” provided by the division of labor.³⁰⁰

The individual faces the “achievements of culture” – “primary motifs of law, art or morality” as forms which, despite their subjective origins, are “no longer in our hands.” The mature forms are “no more concerned with the demands of our individuality

²⁹⁷ Simmel, "Tragedy," 59. ; "Tragödie," 200.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 59 ; Ibid., 200. In "The Crisis of Culture" (1916) Simmel writes: "One book after another, one invention after another, one work of art after another all add up to an endless, formless mass confronting the individual with the demand that he absorb it all." ———, *Simmel on Culture*, 92.

²⁹⁹ "On the Essence of Culture" (1908) in Ibid., 45.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

[. . .] regardless of how central these might be, than are physical forces and their laws.”³⁰¹ In Simmel’s telling, objectified cultural forms are as non-negotiable as facts of nature. Such a rigid view of things seems at odds with Simmel’s description of sociation as process driven by reciprocity, where all actors play a role in creating social forms. Recall that Simmel offered the example of an audience’s influence on a speaker as evidence that all social action is *interaction* and that even subordinates exerts influence. But just as no leader is impervious to the “apparently passive mass” no individual, whether subordinate or dominate, can match the force of objective culture with his own subjective development. Simmel cites language as an example of this condition. For we cannot think, even to ourselves, without the objective form of language. And while language requires multiple individuals to operate, “this parallelism of objective and subjective developments nevertheless possess no fundamental necessity.”³⁰² Language is not custom-made and is ultimately independent of any single individual. That is why we sometimes “feel language to be an alien natural force, which distorts and curtails not only our utterances, but also our innermost intentions.”³⁰³

As objective culture grows more sophisticated, it outpaces the ability of subjective culture to assimilate it and “a frightful disproportion in growth between the two becomes evident.”³⁰⁴ In an 1896 essay on the women’s movement Simmel provides an example of this disproportion. Industrialization has “torn the proletarian woman away” from what Simmel uncritically calls her “natural calling” – the care of home and family. At the same time industrial production has “impoverished the domain of the bourgeois woman.” Due

³⁰¹ ———, "Tragedy," 66-67. ; "Tragödie," 209.

³⁰² Ibid., 67. ; Ibid.

³⁰³ Ibid. ; Ibid.

³⁰⁴ ———, "Metropolis," 421. ; Simmel, "Grosstädte," 129.

to technological advancements the domestic sphere has become much easier to manage, leaving women tied to the home with “unused energies” and liable to “all sorts of breakdowns.” Simmel concludes that, though working at cross-purposes politically, both the proletarian and bourgeois woman are victims of “the fact that the development of objective conditions has progressed faster than the development and adaptation of individuals.”³⁰⁵

With Weberian echoes Simmel describes how the “tragedy of culture” plays out. While technology undoubtedly makes more things possible it ultimately reveals the limitations of individual perspective and action. In *Money*, Simmel writes: “It is true that the infinite distances between ourselves and objects have been overcome by the microscope and the telescope; but we were first conscious of these distances only at the very same moment in which they were overcome.” The “ingenious methods with which we penetrate the inner aspects of nature” can never replace the unified worldview of the Greeks who believed their gods to be reflections of themselves and who had “a teleological concern for the welfare of man.” Today the promise of a divinely sanctioned purpose recedes further and further so that “the more the distance in the external world [*äußerlicher Hinsicht*] is conquered, the more it increases the distance in the spiritual world [*innerlicher Hinsicht*].”³⁰⁶ Finally, “the idea of an ultimate purpose [*Endzwecks*] in

³⁰⁵ “The Women’s Congress and Social Democracy” (1896) Simmel, *Simmel on Culture*, 273. In many ways Simmel’s analysis of gender was progressive for his time, though as the passage above shows he retained a problematic essentialism about sexual difference. Max Weber’s wife, Marianne took Simmel to task for some of his positions. She responded to his 1913 essay “Female Culture” collegially but critically in “Die Frau und die objektive Kultur,” see Marianne Weber, *Frauenfragen Und Frauengedanken; Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Tübingen,: J.C.B. Mohr., 1919), Microform.

³⁰⁶ Simmel, *Money*, 476. ; *Geld*, 540.

which everything is again reconciled” becomes ever more distant given the “fragmented nature of our culture.”³⁰⁷

The secular ‘religion’ of enlightened progress cannot bridge the distance to the spirit either. As Weber did, Simmel recognizes that the modern world is “disenchanted,” and that rather than empower individuals, science makes them feel their own dependence. As it has advanced, knowledge has become so specialized that no single individual can hope to assimilate it all. Simmel writes that, where once “all cognition” served “the maintenance and promotion of life,” today “cognition is no longer used in the service of this practical achievement: science has become a value in itself.”³⁰⁸ In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (discussed in Chapter Four), Horkheimer and Adorno argue that science, like all kinds of practical knowledge, has become not only a value in itself, but far from remaining neutral, serves the forces of economic and political domination. Simmel makes no such connection and does not consider how the form of modern science might serve political or economic goals. As he sees it, the increasing independence and abstraction of science is a product of the growing dominance of objective culture, and this dominance concerns Simmel primarily for its impact on subjective culture.

Again, for Simmel the struggle between objective and subjective culture is as old as culture, which is also rooted in the process of sociation itself.³⁰⁹ Society makes an oxymoronic demand as it “requires the individual to differentiate himself from the

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 360-61. ; Ibid., 395.

³⁰⁸ ———, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 40-41.

³⁰⁹ ———, "Tragedy," 58. ; "Tragödie," 198. Simmel credits Nietzsche with being “the first to feel, with fundamental distinctness, the difference between the interests of humanity, of mankind, and the interests of society.” From the *Grundfragen* in Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 61-62. For Simmel’s relationship to Weber, see Lichtblau, "Der 'Pathos Der Distanz'. Praliminarien Zur Nietzsche -- Rezeption Bei Georg Simmel."

humanly general, but forbids him to stand out from the socially general.”³¹⁰ Modern conditions, particularly the division of labor, which requires specialization in a narrow field, render the sides of this struggle starker than ever:

Society asks of the individual that he employ all his strength in the service of the special function which he has to exercise as a member of it; that he so modify himself as to become the most suitable vehicle for this function. Yet the drive toward unity and wholeness that is characteristic of the individual himself rebels against this role. The individual strives to be rounded out in himself, not merely to help to round out society.³¹¹

The needs of the individual are at odds with those of society. At the same time, the individual cannot become “rounded out in himself” – in his subjectivity – without incorporating the objective cultural forms produced by society. Simmel sees the modern individual as we understand it to be a historical product. During the Renaissance the individual was liberated “from the rusty chains of the guild, birth right, and church.” In the nineteenth Century the individual evolved from the Enlightenment’s “universal man” into one which had to: “become independent [and] also wished to distinguish himself *from other individuals*.”³¹² The ‘freedom’ provided by the money economy helps the individual in this process of distinction.

In *Money*, Simmel writes that in the highly developed money economy, both “the production manager and the laborer,” the department store’s director and salesmen are, “equally subordinated to an objective purpose.” As such, though the relationship may still

³¹⁰ From the *Grundfragen* in Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 62-63.

³¹¹ From the *Grundfragen* in *Ibid.*, 59.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 78. However historicizing the individual did not solve what Simmel called (in a essay published posthumously) “the deepest mystery of *our* world view,” that “unanalyzable unity” – the individual. “Eros, Platonic and Modern” (1921) in Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms; Selected Writings*.

be harder for the worker, “it none the less contains an element of freedom in that his subordination is no longer subjective-personal in nature but is now a technical one.” Simmel explains that under more traditional contractual relationships the “*working person* is hired,” that is “the person as a total, unlimited complex of labor power.” The “dependence and subordination” of an employee in this position is most clear in the case of domestic servants who live in the home of their employer. However when labor is treated like a commodity, as in the metropolitan money economy, “we are dealing with the offer of a completely objective work activity.” Rather than submit himself as a “*working person*,” the worker performs a specific task, or works for a specified amount of time. As Simmel argues, the metropolitan money economy provides an upside to objectification:

The growing self-confidence of the modern worker is the result of the fact that he no longer feels subordinate as a person, but rather contributes only an exactly prescribed amount of work – prescribed on the basis of its monetary equivalent – which leaves the person as such all the more free, the more objective, impersonal and technical work and its regulation become.³¹³

According to Marx, the implication of wage labor is “the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities.”³¹⁴ While Simmel understands that the changing nature of production has significant, very often negative, consequences for the individual, he believes that when labor is measured monetarily and laborers are not defined in terms of loyalty to class or estate, the individual gains a degree of flexibility not available in traditional economies. While he realizes that this freedom is

³¹³ Simmel, *Money*, 335. ; *Geld*, 362.

³¹⁴ Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 70.

not without its problems, Simmel maintains it has unique possibilities for individual development.

As early as 1896 Simmel predicted:

Modern man's one-sided and monotonous role in the division of labor will be compensated for by consumption and enjoyment through the growing pressure of heterogeneous impressions, and the ever faster and more colorful change of excitements. The differentiation of the active side of life is apparently complemented through the extensive diversity of its passive and receiving side.³¹⁵

Simmel was one of the first to explore how the growth of the “passive and receiving” side of life allows individuals to enjoy the “compensatory” effects of a broadened consumer marketplace. Yet while Simmel describes the development and function of individual subjective culture extensively, his analysis of modern consumption, although provocatively suggestive, does not name specific practices or products. Even as his prose artfully captures the pace and power of “heterogeneous impressions,” he does not explain exactly how the modern urban-dweller’s “passive and receiving side” works. Nevertheless by shifting from Marx’s “focus upon production” to “one upon circulation, exchange, and consumption,” Simmel can, more explicitly than Marx or Weber, consider not just how individuals are harmed, but what they gain in the modern money economy.³¹⁶

³¹⁵ “The Berlin Trade Exhibition” (1896) in Simmel, *Simmel on Culture*, 256.

³¹⁶ Frisby, *Georg Simmel*, 32.

Simmel: Mediator Between the Discourses

One exception to Simmel's general discussion of consumption is his recognition of the role modern fashion plays in creating cohesion and distinction at the individual and group level. Simmel argues that desire for the newest fashions is indicative of a deeper tension – the restlessness and insecurity of a society no longer based on “major, permanent, unquestionable convictions,” but the circulation of something – money – which is itself empty of content. Fashion is one of “the fleeting and fluctuating elements of life” that gains “more free space” in the metropolitan money economy.³¹⁷ While traditional modes of stability decline and communal, class, and religious identifications weaken, identity itself becomes fluid, creating the demand for new fashions.

In the 1905 essay “The Philosophy of Fashion,” Simmel argues that the middle classes, which are the most “variable” and “restless” due to their inherent instability, are the greatest consumers of fashion.³¹⁸ In drawing a connection between status-anxiety and consumption practices, Simmel foreshadows later analyses of mass culture. However unlike those later critics, including Kracauer, Horkheimer and Adorno, he does not tie mass culture to the economic and political domination of the working and salaried classes. Simmel is ultimately more optimistic, believing that the gains brought by a varied modernity might compensate for the fracturing of traditional ways of being. In *The Philosophy of Money's* concluding chapter he writes:

If modern man can, under favorable circumstances, secure an island of subjectivity [*eine Reserve des Subjektiven*], a secret, closed-off sphere of privacy – not in the social but in a deeper metaphysical sense – for his most personal

³¹⁷ “The Philosophy of Fashion” (1905) in Simmel, *Simmel on Culture*, 193. ; “Die Mode” in Georg Simmel, *Philosophische Kultur* (Berlin: Verlag Klaus Wagenbach 1998), 47.

³¹⁸ Simmel, *Simmel on Culture*, 202-03. ; *Philosophische Kultur*, 47.

existence, which to some extent compensates for the religious style of life of former times, then this is due to the fact that money relieves us to an ever-increasing extent of direct contact with things, while at the same time making it infinitely easier for us to dominate them and select from them what we require.³¹⁹

As the daily struggle for physical existence takes up less time and energy, Simmel sees a space opening up for the contemplation of things, such as privacy and personal existence, which cannot be measured.

Simmel's sophisticated theory of cultural development and the new forms it takes in the metropolitan money economy, coupled with his attention to the changing context of individual experience, makes him a mediating figure between the first and second discourses. Like Weber's, Simmel's unsentimental analysis of the drawbacks of modernity is executed without nostalgia for an imagined past, or in the hope of achieving future political or spiritual resolution.³²⁰ Yet while Weber focused on major economic and social structures (even as questions of culture haunt his analysis), in his own examination of rationalization, Simmel turned to less expected places: mealtimes, the tempo of city life, and the role fashion plays in social positioning. Siegfried Kracauer, discussed in the next chapter, followed Simmel in investigating the surface of daily urban life to measure the drawbacks and benefits of rationalization (for freedom and community) at the individual level. Whereas Simmel did not acknowledge potential political or economic obstacles to experiencing the new freedoms of the metropolitan

³¹⁹ ———, *Money*, 469. ; *Geld*, 531.

³²⁰ Like Weber, Simmel saw socialism as the ultimate institutionalization of rationalization – not an escape from it. Simmel describes socialism as “directed towards a rationalization of life” which seeks to achieve “the complete control of production by reason” and “to organize the social totality in the supreme rationalism of the machine.” *Ibid.*, 346, 52. For an analysis of Simmel's assessment of socialism, see Jr. Shad, Jeffrey A., "The Groundwork of Simmel's New 'Storey' beneath Historical Materialism " in *Georg Simmel and Contemporary Sociology*, ed. Michael Kaern, Bernard S. Phillips, and R. S. Cohen (Dordrecht ; Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), 312-13.

money economy, Kracauer suggests that there are many such obstacles. The subjects of his study, white-collar workers, or *die Angestellten*, see their ability to “dominate and select from” objective culture curtailed by the tough economic and political realities of Weimar Germany.

An examination of the connections between the money economy and politics is conspicuously absent from Simmel’s work. Although he died in 1918, before the rise of the Nazi party, Simmel could scarcely be unaware of the fierce nationalism and anti-Semitism that surrounded World War One. And although he wrote in several places about the dislocation and anxiety that followed, to borrow Nietzsche’s term – the “death of God” – Simmel did not ask if the free-floating individuals of the modern metropolis would be drawn to movements that provided solid (if irrational) solutions to the dilemmas of modernity. He did not give much consideration to collective political solutions – liberal or illiberal – that might aim to mitigate the problems engendered by rationalization. Although the process at the heart of Simmel’s sociology – *sociation* – is one of interaction, it is at the same time a process wherein individuals struggle to differentiate themselves in the very arena – society – that demands their conformity. Such a view leaves little room for collective identification and action. As coping mechanisms for the trials of modern living, the adoption of a blasé attitude and the cultivation of a “closed-off island of subjectivity” remain individual and apolitical.

Simmel’s lack of political grounding for his philosophical approach was criticized by Marxist theorists, particularly those associated with Critical Theory, who were much less optimistic about the “passive and receiving side” of modern life.³²¹ In their view, not

³²¹ James Bergey argues that Simmel has come in for heavy criticism because many theorists “shoehorn Simmel’s theory into their own totalizing framework” ignoring the positive potential of the life made

only did Simmel fail to consider the historically created conditions of economic inequality, he never offered a comprehensive total vision. Luckács lauded Simmel's "boundless and unrestrained sensibility," but with the caveat "one must also speak of its missing center, of an inability to make ultimate, absolute decisions."³²² Ernst Bloch described his former teacher as a "collector of standpoints" and "the philosopher of the perhaps" for Simmel's refusal to make final judgments.³²³ Adorno was much less generous, writing that Simmel's "need for philosophical externalization, the need to disappear into the object, becomes distorted into a readiness to philosophize about anything and everything," ultimately weakened his conclusions.³²⁴

In its essentials, Simmel's analysis of the characteristics of rationalization -- a calculating spirit that favors quantification over qualification, depersonalization, and the increasing distance between means and ends -- is no different than that of Weber, Kracauer, or Zygmunt Bauman. But Simmel's understanding of the roots of these developments, and the individual's response to them, is all his own. Ultimately Simmel did not see rationalization as a problem to be solved; despite its modern intensification,

possible by the modern metropolis. While his analysis clearly supports the Marxist critique of alienated labor, Simmel offers an important "caveat about Metropolitan uniqueness and opportunities for a unique kind of individual freedom." Bergey, "Georg Simmel's Metropolis: Anticipating the Postmodern."

³²² Lukács, "Memories of Georg Simmel." In the judgment of Bryan Turner, *Philosophy of Money*, is "a classic study of the roots of modernity and modern consciousness" on par with Weber's *Protestant Ethic*. Turner also demonstrates convincingly that Luckács' theory of reification owes much to Simmel's description of cultural production. Bryan S. Turner, "Simmel, Rationalization and the Sociology of Money," *The Sociological Review* 34, no. 1 (1986): 100-01. Recent scholarship has challenged the long-held view that Simmel's work lacked overall coherence. Newer research shows there is a case to be made for a "coherent sociological program" Frisby, *Georg Simmel*, 13. See also Levine, "Introduction." ; Levine, "Sociology's Quest for the Classics: The Case of Simmel." ; Levine, "Simmel Reappraised: Old Images, New Scholarship." ; Kohnke, *Der Junge Simmel : In Theoriebeziehungen Und Sozialen Bewegungen*. ; A. M. Bevers, *Dynamik Der Formen Bei Georg Simmel : Eine Studie Über Die Methodische Und Theoretische Einheit Eines Gesamtwerkes*, Sozialwissenschaftliche Abhandlungen Der Görres-Gesellschaft ; Bd. 13 (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1985).

³²³ Quoted in Frisby, *Georg Simmel*, 146. Frisby, *Georg Simmel*, xxv.

³²⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, trans. Rolf Tiedemann, European Perspectives. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 215.

rationalization is but another manifestation of the basic dilemma at the heart of cultural development. Simmel's analysis is both present and eternal – he described concrete daily experience and timeless conflict. The center of both Simmel's sociology and philosophy is the individual. As his one-time student and life-long friend, Kracauer, wrote, while Simmel “still owes us a far-reaching, all-encompassing notion of the world” – “the unity of meaning that Simmel denies to the world he accords instead to individuals.”³²⁵

Kracauer, the key figure of the second discourse, looks at a more historically specific situation to examine how a particular set of modern individuals, *die Angestellten*, are able to negotiate rationalization given their positions in work, play, and politics in Weimar Berlin. Kracauer found inspiration in Simmel's demonstration that the everyday and the fleeting could provide access to a deeper reality:

Simmel is a born mediator [*Mittler*] between phenomena [*Erscheinung*] and ideas; using a net of relation of analogy and of essential homogeneity, he advances from the surface of things [*Oberflächliche Symbolcharakter*] to their spiritual/intellectual substrate everywhere he looks. [. . .] The most trivial event leads down into the shafts of the soul; from some perspective there is a significant meaning to be obtained from every action.³²⁶

³²⁵ “Georg Simmel” in Kracauer, *Mass Ornament*, 225, 53. Historians of sociology have also noted that Simmel's emphasis on the individual was central to his overall project and unique for a sociologist of his time Birgitta Nedelmann argues that “Simmel is different from the other classics [Weber, Durkheim, Tönnies] of sociology because he has a systematic interest in the analysis not only of social structure and institutional arrangements, but also of the effects such external factors have on the life of individuals. Nedelmann, “On the Concept of 'Erleben' in Georg Simmel's Sociology,” 226. Bernard Phillips makes a similar point: “For Georg Simmel – more than for any other classical sociologist – the quest for individuality is the central problem of the modern world.” Bernard S. Phillips, “Simmel, Individuality, and Fundamental Change,” in *Georg Simmel and Contemporary Sociology*, ed. Michael Kaern, et al. (Dordrecht ; Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), 259.

Donald Levine calls the fate of the individual the “key concern” that gives unity to Simmel's works. Levine, “Simmel as Educator,” 102.

³²⁶ Kracauer, *Mass Ornament*, 253.

The influence of Simmel is clear in Kracauer's most famous Weimar-era essay, "The Mass Ornament" (1927):

The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions [*unscheinbaren Oberflächenäßerungen*] than from an epoch's judgment about itself [. . .] by virtue of their unconscious nature, [these expressions] provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things.³²⁷

Like Kracauer, Simmel sought, not to "accuse or pardon" but "to understand" what rationalization means for individual experience. Simmel recognized that new technology could, rather than liberate us from our dependence on nature, equally be seen as "fetters" that master "the self-reliance" of earlier times. He argued that the money economy, which demands specialization on the part of individuals, in essence turns people into means, who are then unable to grasp the ends or "final purposes" of their labor. The division of labor fragments their experience, producing a condition of estrangement, or alienation. Yet at the same time Simmel believed "the marvelous expediency and the complicated precision of machines, products and the supra-individual organizations of contemporary culture" could help modern individuals round out themselves again by selecting what they require from the endless offerings of "contemporary culture."³²⁸ He did not consider how culture, rather than a refuge, might become another system of domination.

³²⁷ Ibid., 75.

³²⁸ Simmel, *Money*, 483. ; *Geld*, 549-550.

As Kracauer noted earlier in his Simmel essay: “he [Simmel] takes little account of the historical situation people find themselves at any given moment.”³²⁹ While following Simmel’s lead in mining the surface manifestations of daily urban life to access the “shafts of the soul” and “the fundamental substance of the state of things,” Kracauer situates his analysis historically by looking at very specific phenomena in the world of salaried employees: dance halls and cinemas, cafes and weekend getaways, union broadsheets and management manuals, advertisements and training certificates. As the next chapter shows, because Kracauer is examining a much more narrow context, the limitations that rationalization creates for individuals – and the corresponding drive for escape into popular culture and mass politics – becomes more apparent.

³²⁹ Kracauer, *Mass Ornament*, 225.

Chapter Three

Siegfried Kracauer and the Rationalized World of *die Angestellten*

I. Die Angestellten at Work

“Unknown Territory”

In 1929 Siegfried Kracauer, on assignment for *Die Frankfurter Zeitung*, set out to uncover the “exoticism of commonplace existence [*Exotik des Alltags*].”³³⁰ In an essay entitled “Unknown Territory [*Unbekanntes Gebiet*],” Kracauer explains that he is not exploring a foreign or underground world, but one in “full public view,” which despite its visibility is actually poorly understood.³³¹ His subject is the working and leisure lives of Berlin’s *die Angestellten* – the white-collar workers who make up the *Neue Mittelstand* (New Middle Estate).

Rationalization and the increasingly visible presence of salaried workers in urban Germany were far from “unknown” phenomena during the Weimar Republic, yet Kracauer’s approach to these developments is unique. Whereas most analysis of rationalization and changing social trends remained at the ‘high’ level of academic

³³⁰ ———, *Salaried*, 29. Hereafter *Salaried*; Siegfried Kracauer, *Die Angestellten : Aus Dem Neuesten Deutschland* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971), 11. Hereafter, *Angestellten*. Verso’s English edition of *Die Angestellten* does not use the literal translation – “The White-Collar Workers: From the newest Germany” – for its title. “The White-Collar Workers” is less precise and does not imply the same level of group cohesion as the German term “*die Angestellten*.”

³³¹ Kracauer offers this analogy by way of explanation: “It is precisely its public nature that protects it from discovery, just like the ‘Letter to Her Majesty’ in Edgar Allan Poe’s tale: nobody notices the letter because it is out on display.” Kracauer, *Salaried*, 29. ; Kracauer, *Angestellten*, 11. Michael Hoffman discusses Kracauer’s investigation of the everyday exotic in Michael Hoffmann, “Kritische Öffentlichkeit Als Erkenntnisprozess. Zu Siegfried Kracauers Essays Über Die Angestellten in Der Frankfurter Zeitung ” in *Siegfried Kracauer : Neue Interpretationen*, ed. Michael Kessler and Thomas Y. Levin (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1990).

economics and sociology, Kracauer follows Simmel down to the “shafts of the soul” to see how rationalization plays out at the everyday level – the territory of the second discourse. In his investigations of employee culture, Kracauer gives faces to the small components of Weber’s large bureaucratic organization (as described in the first discourse). By examining not just the working, but the leisure and political lives of *Die Angestellten*, Kracauer anticipates the highly influential analysis of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Finally, in laying bare the daily humiliations and struggles of Weimar-era white-collar employees, he both builds on and embellishes the image of economically and socially vulnerable “little men” and women whose political naiveté is potentially very dangerous.

Kracauer devoted a whole series of *feuilletons*, or newspaper essays, to *die Angestellten* and in 1930 published them in a book titled: *Die Angestellten: Aus dem neuesten Deutschland (The White-collar Workers: From the newest Germany)*.³³² Their rapid increase in numbers, the significant percentage of women among their ranks, their role in workplaces using the most advanced rationalization practices, and their appetite for the newest cultural and consumer goods made *die Angestellten* prime markers of the “newest” Germany. Using interviews with Berlin employees and his own reports from the workplace scene, Kracauer was able to show how rationalized working conditions stifled employee solidarity, individual agency, and devalued personal experience. At the

³³² On the translation of *die Angestellten*, see note above. Erhard Schütz suggests the *feuilleton* – “the intellectual essay on the issues and ideas of the day” was crucial for creating the myth of Berlin’s “Golden Twenties,” for both contemporaries and historians. Erhard Schütz, “Beyond Glittering Reflections of Asphalt: Changing Images of Berlin in Weimar Literary Journalism,” in *Dancing on the Volcano : Essays on the Culture of the Weimar Republic*, ed. Thomas W. Kniesche and Stephen Brockmann (Columbia, SC, USA: Camden House, 1994), 119. Other famous Weimar *feuilleton* writers include Walter Benjamin and Joseph Roth. Michael Beinert considers both, along with Kracauer, in his useful book. (Notably he opens with a discussion of Simmel’s writings on the metropolis). Michael Bienert, *Die Eingebildete Metropole : Berlin Im Feuilleton Der Weimarer Republik* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1992).

same time an increasingly powerful consumer culture, offering goods both material and intangible, promised new ways to forge individuality while compensating for decreased economic and social power. Kracauer's analysis of the impact of rationalization on individuals, both in and outside of the office, makes *Die Angestellten* a key text of the second discourse.

The effects of rationalization were exacerbated by the volatile economic conditions of Weimar Germany, which put those searching for or simply trying to maintain employment in an extremely tenuous position. Given the high number of job seekers, businesses could be picky about personality, education, aptitude (as measured by job placement tests), and even appearance. Early in *Die Angestellten*, Kracauer reports that a "friendly," "nice," and young appearance was most attractive to employers.³³³ In one revealing exchange a personnel manager in a large department store tells Kracauer what he looks for in an employee: "Not exactly pretty. What's far more crucial is . . . oh, you know, a morally pink complexion [*Eine moralisch-rosa Hautfarbe*]."³³⁴ To the manager's "oh, you know," Kracauer responds, "I do. A morally pink complexion – this combination of concepts at a stroke renders transparent the everyday life that is fleshed out in window displays, salary-earners [*Angestellten*] and illustrated papers."³³⁵

Kracauer's commentary on this remark distills two central topics of the low discourse. First is the description of a "salaried type" [*Angestelltentypus*] – an idealized "pleasant" – that is compliant -- individual who, with the help of the right consumer goods, produces him or herself as a desirable employee in a tight job market.³³⁶ Second is the control of

³³³ Kracauer, *Salaried*, 38. ; *Angestellten*, 24.

³³⁴ *Ibid.* ; *Ibid.*

³³⁵ *Ibid.* ; *Ibid.*

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 39. ; *Ibid.*, 25.

erotic and political desires – morality – by surveillance veiled as management at work, and outside of the office through redirection into specific kinds of consumption enforced by an increasingly powerful culture industry.³³⁷

This essay is entitled “Selection” (*Auslese*) and Kracauer considers *die Angestellten* to be the central targets of department store and magazine advertising campaigns precisely because employees must continuously cultivate their employability.³³⁸ The imperative to have a “morally pink complexion” means to be fully acquiescent to employer demands; employees should both appear and behave ‘morally.’ For those doing the selection “would like to cover life with a varnish [*Firnis*] concealing its far-from-rosy reality.” This varnish must not only conceal, but also “prevent the eruption of desires.” It is to the benefit of both employers and the market that employee desire and ambition (*Begierden*), be directed towards consumption; that is away from political or private actions that could disrupt business.³³⁹ Kracauer continues:

The gloom of unadorned morality would bring as much danger to the prevailing order as pink that began to flare up immorally. So that both may be neutralized, they are tied to one another. *The same system that requires the aptitude test also produces this nice, friendly mixture: and the more rationalization progresses, the more the morally pink appearance gains ground. It is scarcely too hazardous to assert that in Berlin a salaried type [Angestelltentypus] is developing, standardized in the direction of the desired complexion [Hautfarbe].* Speech,

³³⁷ My use of the term “culture industry” is anachronistic, as it was not coined by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno until 1944. However I believe it is germane in this context and will argue later in this chapter and the next that Kracauer’s Weimar writings were important precursors to Horkheimer and Adorno’s post-war analysis of mass culture. See discussion at the beginning of this chapter’s Part II below.

³³⁸ The term “*Auslese*” can also refer to “genetic selection,” as in selective breeding.

³³⁹ Kracauer, *Salaried*, 38. ; *Angestellten*, 25.

clothes, gestures and countenances become assimilated and the result of the process is that very same pleasant appearance, which with the help of photographs can be widely reproduced. A selective breeding [*Zuchtwahl*] that is carried out under the pressure of social relations, and that is necessarily supported by the economy though the arousal of corresponding consumer needs.³⁴⁰

“Unadorned morality” – a person who does not accommodate him or herself to the standard of the complacent, de-individualized employee type, is as threatening to the system as uncontrolled desires (“pink” that “flares up immorally”). Conformity in both appearance and behavior are enforced by being “tied to one another.” Rationalization progresses in the office, where it is enforced by management (as in “aptitude tests”), and outside of it, where consumer culture promotes “the morally pink appearance.” A “salaried type” emerges as new media disseminates a standardized ideal and markets the products necessary for its emulation. By policing the boundaries of their *Stand* (estate) and by participating in an economy which “arouses corresponding consumer needs,” employees themselves support the “selective breeding” behind the *Angestelltentypus*.

The relationship between rationalization, status insecurity, political passivity, and consumption, as it plays out in the lives of *die Angestellten*, is the central theme of the second discourse. This discourse coheres most clearly in the Weimar era, where it feeds on the reality and stereotypes of *die Neue Mittelstand*. The *Angestelltentypus* of this discourse represents the “little” men and women of popular and academic commentaries, the twentieth century petty-bourgeoisie, who are “politically” homeless, and thus

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 38-39. ; Ibid., 24-25. My emphasis. “Complexion” and “selective breeding” have racial overtones but Kracauer does not make an explicit connection between Weimar “race science” and the “system” he is discussing here. Nevertheless his choice of phrasing points to the ubiquity of racialized language at this time.

politically dangerous. The subjects of the second discourse reemerge in a new guise as the bureaucrats and “cogs in the machine” of post World War Two analysis. The authors of these analyses sought to integrate the Holocaust into the story of modernity – a story that had previously been understood as one of progress. Many post-war thinkers concluded that the calculating, impersonal, and dehumanizing nature of bureaucratic rationality was essential for the perpetration of the Holocaust and called into question the premises of western civilization itself. Tellingly, the figure that came to dominate these discussions was not a sadistic monster of a Nazi, but the man depicted in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, the “banal” bureaucrat who followed orders and did not ask questions, even of himself. Arendt’s Eichmann shares many characteristics with Kracauer’s *Angestellten*. Like the employees of Kracauer’s study, Eichmann was cowed by his superiors, even as he envied and tried to achieve their social status.

The second discourse is characterized by its subjects, but also its mediums and methods. Kracauer’s examination of *die Angestellten* consists not of discrete analyses of economic policy or social practices, but in the description of the working, leisure, and even fantasy lives of his subjects -- of their unique cultural world. As such, his approach has justly been called ethnographical.³⁴¹ Kracauer too saw himself as a kind of urban anthropologist, claiming that the lives of salaried employees were “more unknown than that of primitive tribes” and that *die Angestellten* enjoyed a distinct culture “made by employees for employees and seen by most employees as a culture.”³⁴² Yet even as he describes a specific group, Kracauer’s analysis privileges the experiences of specific individuals. Whereas Simmel describes an abstract, psychological subject – “the

³⁴¹ Mülder-Bach, "Introduction," 14-17. See also Christian Sieg, "Beyond Realism: Siegfried Kracauer and the Ornaments of the Ordinary," *New German Critique* 37, no. 1 (2010).

³⁴² Kracauer, *Salaried*, 29, 32. ; *Angestellten*, 11, 15.

individual” – in *Die Angestellten*, Kracauer presents multiple individuals who are waging a daily battle for their subjective selves in conditions of extreme objectification. The *feuilleton* as “the realm of the quotidian” provides Kracauer with an ideal form for this exploration.³⁴³

Kracauer’s biography and diverse professional background influenced his style and methodology. Born in Frankfurt in 1889 to a comfortably middle-class Jewish family, Kracauer, an architect by training, published his first piece in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1907. Kracauer continued to write literary pieces even as he finished his dissertation and was employed by an architectural firm.³⁴⁴ In 1921 he became a salaried writer for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and by 1924 was made a full editor.³⁴⁵ In 1928 his autobiographical novel, *Ginster*, appeared anonymously. After the publication of *Die Angestellten* in book form in 1930, Kracauer and his wife, Lili, moved to the capitol where he joined the Berlin bureau of the paper. The Kracauers left Germany in early 1933 for Paris. After a trying period of exile and much difficulty emigrating, the Kracauers arrived in New York in the spring of 1941. In New York Kracauer found employment at the library of the Museum of Modern Art working on film research. In 1947 his study of Weimar cinema, *From Caligari to Hitler*, was published; it remains Kracauer’s best-known work in the United States and accounts for his reputation (until recently) as primarily a film theorist. Kracauer lived in New York until his death in

³⁴³ Thomas Y. Levin, "Introduction," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimer Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 5. On this point see also Helmut Staubmann, "The Ornamental Form of the Iron Cage: An Aesthetic Representation of Modern Society," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 10, no. 4 (1997): 592.

³⁴⁴ A legacy of his architectural training, the importance of spatial metaphors and images in Kracauer’s work has been noted by many commentators. See especially David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin* (Cambridge: Polity, 1985), 141-47.

³⁴⁵ “Kracauer published nearly two thousand articles in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* during the 1920s and 1930s.” Levin, “Introduction,” 3. Levin, “The Mass Ornament,” 3.

1966.³⁴⁶ His *Theory of Film* was completed in 1956 and his final work, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, appeared posthumously in 1971.³⁴⁷

Die Angestellten, along with the important Weimar-era essays collected in *The Mass Ornament (Das Ornament der Masse)*, were products of a change in Kracauer's theoretical focus that occurred in the mid 1920s.³⁴⁸ He rejected the abstract categories of formal sociology in favor of a more immediate examination of the "individual and meaningful" phenomena of everyday experience.³⁴⁹ This turn to the tangible led Kracauer out of the long shadow cast by German idealist philosophy.³⁵⁰ As early as 1922 he wrote that: "The overburdening of theoretical thinking has led us, to a horrifying degree, to become distanced from reality—a reality that is filled with incarnate things and people and that therefore demands to be seen concretely."³⁵¹ By 1925 Kracauer's chief theoretical concern had shifted from the metaphysical to the everyday.³⁵²

To understand "the reality of the everyday world," Kracauer looked to Marxist theory.³⁵³ In particular the work of the Georg Lukács, and his notion of "transcendental homelessness," was important for Kracauer, who would later describe *die Angestellten* as

³⁴⁶ Thomas Elsaesser's critical history of Weimar cinema relies on *Caligari* as both touch point and foil. Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000).

³⁴⁷ The most complete biographical details, along with documents and photographs, are in Ingrid Belke, *Siegfried Kracauer 1889-1966* (Marbach am Neckar: Marbach am Neckar, 1988).

³⁴⁸ This collection, selected by Kracauer himself, was first published in 1963. Kracauer, *Mass Ornament*. Hereafter *Mass Ornament*.; Siegfried Kracauer, *Das Ornament Der Masse: Essays* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977). Hereafter *Das Ornament*.

³⁴⁹ Mülder-Bach, "Introduction," 8. See also Gertrud Koch, *Siegfried Kracauer: An Introduction*, trans. Jeremy Gaines (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

³⁵⁰ Uwe Pralle suggests the *feuilleton* provided Kracauer with a form adequate for his "philosophy in fragments," which responded to the disintegration of Idealism post World War One. See Uwe Pralle, "Philosophie in Bruchstücken Siegfried Kracauers Feuilletons" in *Siegfried Kracauer: Zum Werk Des Romanciers, Feuilletonisten, Architekten, Filmwissenschaftlers Und Soziologen*, ed. Andreas Volk (Zürich: Seismo, 1996), 77.

³⁵¹ "Those Who Wait" (1922) in Kracauer, *Mass Ornament*, 139-40.; *Das Ornament*, 118.

³⁵² On this theme see Sieg, "Beyond Realism."

³⁵³ Frisby, *Fragments* 117.

“spiritually homeless” (“*geistig obdachlos*”).³⁵⁴ However Kracauer’s appropriation of Lukács, and Marxist theory generally, was incomplete and idiosyncratic, as Miriam Hansen describes:

Kracauer not only rejected Lukács’ notion of the proletariat as both object and subject of a Hegelian dialectics of history; he also balked at the conception of reality as a totality that the theoretical intellect presumed to know from a position outside or above. For Kracauer, the recognition of the historical process required the construction of categories from within the material.³⁵⁵

Reality was most observable in “incarnate things and people,” rather than from a position outside of everyday experience; analytic categories should be drawn from history, not laid over top of it. Kracauer’s materialism, like Simmel’s, depended as much or more on the phenomenological tradition as it did a Marxist one.³⁵⁶ Kracauer tended to use the terminology of Marxism (“proletariat,” “bourgeoisie”) as adjectives, not nouns. These terms had meaning for Kracauer because he recognized socio-economic classes as real. At the same time, he did not treat them as fixed parts of a forgone historical process. He aimed to describe an existing reality, not lay out the path to creating a better one, and he did not organize the results of his analysis according to an overarching theoretical model.

In Kracauer’s own words “The core of the work [*Die Angestellten*] is made up of direct quotations, conversations, and observations. These should be seen not as examples of any theory, but as exemplary instances of reality [*exemplarische Fälle der*

³⁵⁴ Kracauer, *Salaried*, 91. ; Kracauer, *Angestellten*, 95.

³⁵⁵ Miriam Hansen, "America, Paris, the Alps: Kracauer (and Benjamin) on Cinema and Modernity " in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 370. See also Frisby, *Fragments* 126.

³⁵⁶ Frisby, *Fragments* 117.

Wirklichkeit].”³⁵⁷ Kracauer found these “exemplary instances” in the off-hand comments made in office and department stores, aptitude tests, management manuals, company newspapers, and union statements. He understood the presentation and analysis of this reality, more than its theoretical grounding, to be his task. Kracauer considered himself to be writing about a “situation still barely explored,” so any final conclusions about it were bound to be premature.³⁵⁸

Yet by 1930 the situation of *die Angestellten* could not fairly be characterized as “barely explored.” In Weimar Germany there were numerous commentaries on both rationalization and the *Neue Mittelstand*.³⁵⁹ How was Kracauer’s *Die Angestellten* different? The authors of other major studies on *die Angestellten* focused on employee unions and organizations, class and status distinctions, rationalization measures and political activity; Kracauer addressed all of these issues as well but claimed his study was unique because it privileged the needs of *die Angestellten* over those of the employers.³⁶⁰ His unique ‘ethnographic’ approach yielded a field study of *die Angestellten* that presented the experience of the employees themselves.

Surface Investigation

To write *Die Angestellten* Kracauer went beyond cold data to the places where the employees were – unemployment agencies, job placement centers, and trains carrying

³⁵⁷ Kracauer, *Salaried*, 25. ; Kracauer, *Angestellten*, 7.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.* ; *Ibid.*

³⁵⁹ For a brief sampling see “White-Collar Workers: *Mittelstand* or Middle Class?” in Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg, *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, Weimar and Now ; 3. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 181-94. Hereafter *W.R.S.B.*

³⁶⁰ Kracauer, *Salaried*, 25. *Ibid.*, 7.

weekenders to the countryside – just to name a few. He interviewed his subjects and included their voices in his work (albeit often accompanied by condescending editorial asides). Kracauer could disregard the conventions of social science because he was writing outside the academy for the popular (though high-brow) press.³⁶¹ In David Frisby’s astute characterization, Kracauer’s critical perspective was not “‘from above’ but from below.”³⁶²

Kracauer never explicitly articulated a wholesale theory of interpretation but did offer intermittent explanations for his methodology. In *Die Angestellten*’s opening essay Kracauer explains how his approach goes beyond mere “reporting.”

Writers scarcely know any higher ambition than to report; the reproduction of observed reality is the order of the day. [. . .] But existence is not captured by being at best duplicated in reportage. The latter has been a legitimate counterblow against idealism, nothing more. [. . .] A hundred reports from a factory do not add up to the reality of the factory, but remain for all eternity a hundred views of the factory. Reality is a construction. Certainly life must be observed for it to appear. Yet it is by no means contained in the more or less random observational results of reportage; rather it is to be found solely in the mosaic that is assembled from single observations on the basis of comprehension of their meaning. Reportage photographs life; such a mosaic would be its image [*Bild*].³⁶³

³⁶¹ Kracauer was free to be less conventional than even Simmel; whereas the latter had been marginalized within the academy, Kracauer was never in it, other than as a student. For Kracauer as a perpetual outsider see Jay “The Extraterritorial Life of Siegfried Kracauer” in Martin Jay, *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

³⁶² Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, 183.

³⁶³ Kracauer, *Salaried*, 32. ; Kracauer, *Angestellten*, 15-16.

Kracauer complains that writers have become, rather than critics, mere reporters. His problem is not with the profession of journalism (after all he is working as a reporter himself), but with an uncritical approach that merely “duplicates” reality rather than subjects it to critical analysis. While Kracauer concedes that reportage is a “legitimate” response to idealism, he warns that documentation alone gets no closer to reality than abstract idealism. Strict empiricism may work for understanding the natural world, but in the human one, “reality is a construction.” That is, social and economic relationships do not unfold according to objective natural laws, but are the products of human actions. The understanding of such relationships demands not the simple reproduction of “random” observations, but the purposeful reassembly of “single observations” – a mosaic. The difference between a photograph and an image is that between something accidental and something intentional. Kracauer’s phenomenological approach involves selection and interpretation; as Kracauer scholar Helmut Michael Staubmann explains, Kracauer practices “the dissolution of the essential from the empirically random.”³⁶⁴

Given Kracauer’s position it is fair to ask how he can reveal “exemplary instances of reality” if reality itself is a construction.³⁶⁵ The essay “Film 1928” goes a ways towards answering this question. In it Kracauer discusses the 1927 film *Berlin: Symphony of a City* (*Berlin: die Sinfonie der Grosstadt*), a silent documentary which presents un-editorialized images from a single day in Berlin. Kracauer explains why the ‘objective,’ eye of the camera doesn’t really tell us anything:

³⁶⁴ Staubmann, "Ornamental Form," 595.

³⁶⁵ Kracauer’s concept of reality was never wholly consistent but oscillated “among metaphysical and material, perceptual, social, psychoanalytic, ideological, and political meanings” Miriam Hansen, “Decentric Perspectives: Kracauer’s Early Writings on Film and Mass Culture,” *New German Critique* 0, no. 54 (1991): 62.

A film without a real plot, it attempts to allow the metropolis to arise out of a sequence of microscopic individual traits. But does it convey the reality of Berlin? No: it is just as blind to reality as any other feature film, and this is due to its lack of a political stance [*Haltungslosigkeit*]. Instead of penetrating its enormous object in a way that would betray a true understanding of its social, economic, and political structure, and instead of observing it with human concern [*menschlicher Anteilnahme*] or even tackling it from a particular vantage point in order to resolutely take it apart, Ruttmann leaves the thousands of details unconnected, one next to the other, inserting at most some arbitrarily conceived transitions that are meaningless.³⁶⁶

The director Walter Ruttmann has essentially offered “a hundred reports” from Berlin but failed to communicate anything about its reality. Ruttmann’s arbitrary sequencing of unconnected details is as unrealistic as feature films which present far-fetched plots that fail to reflect the experiences of their audiences. The absence of an editorial viewpoint, which is intended to promote objectivity, ultimately fails to expose “a single meaningful relationship.”³⁶⁷

Kracauer’s problem with *Berlin* is not with the film’s subject – scenes of ordinary daily life -- but with the director’s uncritical presentation. Rather than simply observe and record, the critic should aim to penetrate his object of study with “human concern,” only then can observations be rendered meaningful. In another essay from 1928, Kracauer praises his friend Walter Benjamin for forgoing fidelity to pure reproduction, instead believing “that it is not necessary to respect the immediate – that the façade must be torn

³⁶⁶ Kracauer, *Mass Ornament*, 78. ; *Das Ornament*, 307-308.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 318. ; *Ibid.*, 308.

down, and form cut to pieces.”³⁶⁸ Unlike Benjamin, Ruttmann gives “the immediate” too much respect. A better approach is the one taken by Kracauer’s teacher Simmel, whom Kracauer praised in a 1919 study as “someone who breaks apart the surface resemblances [*Vordergrundsähnlichkeiten*] that exist everywhere between things, demonstrating in the process the fallaciousness of various doctrines based on the silent acceptance of such resemblances.”³⁶⁹ In his Weimar-era writings, Kracauer perfected his own technique of critical surface investigation.

In critic Christian Sieg’s astute phrasing, Kracauer “searches for surface phenomena, which—like a mosaic—lay bare their own principles of construction.”³⁷⁰ One such phenomenon is the “Tiller Girls,” a British ‘chorus line’ type dance troop.³⁷¹ In one of his most famous essays, 1927’s “The Mass Ornament,” Kracauer dissects their routine to demonstrate the power of surface-level investigation.

The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions [*unscheinbaren Oberflächenäusserungen*] than from that epoch’s judgments about itself. Since these judgments are expressions of the tendencies of a particular era, they do not offer conclusive testimony about its overall constitution. The surface-level expressions, however, by virtue of their

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 261. ; Ibid., 252. In the Weimar art world form was also being “cut to pieces” and reassembled in collage.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 235. ; Ibid., 221. The complete essay on Simmel has only recently been published, see Siegfried Kracauer, *Frühe Schriften Aus Dem Nachlass*, 1. Aufl. ed., 2 vols., vol. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004). Klaus Koziol discusses Simmel’s influence on Kracauer’s methodology in Koziol Klaus, “Die Wirklichkeit Ist Eine Konstruktion. Zur Methodologie Siegfried Kracauers ” in *Siegfried Kracauer : Neue Interpretationen* ed. Michael Kessler and Thomas Y. Levin (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1990).

³⁷⁰ Sieg, “Beyond Realism,” 106.

³⁷¹ Kracauer calls the Tiller girls “products of American distraction factories,” but they were actually British, Kracauer, *Mass Ornament*, 75. ; *Das Ornament*, 50. Kracauer returns to an analysis of “girl troops” in the 1931 essays “Girls and Crisis” – only this time in the context of world-wide economic depression and the failure of rationalized capitalism, in Kaes, Jay, and Dimendberg, *W.R.S.B.*, 565-66.

unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things [*Grundgehalt des Bestehenden*].³⁷²

Kracauer argues that “inconspicuous” and seemingly inconsequential everyday phenomena are more revealing than formal pronouncements (an “epoch’s judgments about itself”). Reading the surface yields greater insights because its expressions are unconscious and uncensored. Knowledge of lived reality -- “the state of things” -- can only be gained from critical analysis of things themselves.

Arguing that “the hands of the factory correspond to the legs of the Tiller Girls,” Kracauer contends “the structure of the mass ornament reflects that of the entire contemporary situation.”³⁷³ The official line on rationalization may be that it improves the quality of life for all, but surface-level analysis shows that human values fall by the wayside when: “Like the mass ornament, the capitalist production process is an end in itself [*ist sich Selbstzweck*].”³⁷⁴ When producing the mass ornament, dancers cease to function as individuals, becoming instead “indissoluble girl clusters whose movements are demonstrations of mathematics.”³⁷⁵ Paralleling the public spectacle of the Tiller Girls “the production process runs its secret course in public.”³⁷⁶ Just like the dancers, workers in the rationalized economy “perform a partial function without grasping the totality.” The modern firm, organized according to the Taylorized factory model, functions as an end in itself -- not “for the sake of values,” but “in order to expand the business.” Thus

³⁷² Kracauer, *Mass Ornament*, 75. ; Kracauer, *Das Ornament* 50.

³⁷³ Kracauer, *Mass Ornament*, 78. ; *Das Ornament*, 53.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.* ; *Ibid.*

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 76. ; *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 78. ; *Ibid.*, 53.

Kracauer concludes, “the mass ornament is the aesthetic reflex to which the prevailing economic system aspires.”³⁷⁷

Kracauer’s investigations into popular culture, including sports, the dance craze, and especially film, are made possible by this interrogation of the surface level. As Sabine Hake puts it: “the superficial products of entertainment are the preferred objects [of critique], since their meaning lies close to the surface.”³⁷⁸ Yet the relative transparency of their messages does not render them benign. In the 1927 essay, “The Little Shopgirls go to the Movies” (“*Die kleinen Ladenmädchen gehen ins Kino*”), Kracauer explains how the ‘surface level’ of popular films are revealing precisely because of their unreality.³⁷⁹ While he admits most popular films “are pretty unrealistic,” Kracauer argues they still have much to tell us:

The films do not therefore cease to reflect society. On the contrary: the more incorrectly they present the surface of things, the more correct they become and the more clearly they mirror the secret mechanism of society. [. . .] Stupid and unreal film fantasies are the *daydreams of society*, in which its actual reality comes to the fore and its otherwise repressed wishes take on form.³⁸⁰

Thus the critic can learn more from an unrealistic melodrama than a ‘realistic’ film like *Berlin*, (and perhaps even a sociologist’s ‘scientific,’ report). Hansen provides a pithy assessment: “Within this basically Freudian model of cultural analysis, reality resides

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 78-79. ; Ibid., 54.

³⁷⁸ Sabine Hake, “Girls and Crisis: The Other Side of Diversion,” *New German Critique* 40, no. Winter 1987 (1987): 155.

³⁷⁹ Heide Schlüpmann puts it nicely: “Illusion has aesthetic significance not as the veil of truth but in the uncovering of reality which lacks any true coherence.” Heide Schlüpmann, “Phenomenology of Film,” *New German Critique* 40, no. Winter 1987 (1987): 102.

³⁸⁰ Kracauer, *Mass Ornament*, 292. ; *Das Ornament*, 280.

both in the mechanism of repression and in what is repressed.”³⁸¹ Film fantasies distract their audiences from contemplating the conditions that created the need for escape in the first place; at the same time, they reveal secret desires for economic and erotic liberation.

Through surface investigation Kracauer practices critical analysis of the everyday. In this he distinguishes himself from the “radical intelligentsia” which presents itself as an opponent of all powers working against “a reasonable human order.” For despite their sincerity, these radicals make protesting “too easy” because they are “roused only by extreme cases” and fail to appreciate the “imperceptible dreadfulness of normal existence.” Thus their approach:

does not really impinge on the core of given conditions, but confines itself to its symptoms; it castigates obvious deformations and forgets about the sequence of small events of which our normal social life consists – events as whose product those deformations can alone be understood.³⁸²

An analysis focused only on large events and causes may produce bold slogans, but cannot reach a full understanding of a reality which consists of “small events.” The nature of daily life must first be recognized before it can change, and it is only on the level of the everyday that a truly radically restructuring of society can occur. Kracauer queries the experience of work -- what most people spend most of their time doing – to understand the social life produced by a rationalized economy and culture. The practitioners of the first discourse—Weber, Horkheimer and Adorno, and to some extent, Simmel, are concerned with the relationship of producers to the products of their labor and consumption, but not with the shape of the workday itself. Kracauer examines

³⁸¹ Hansen, “Decentric Perspectives,” 64.

³⁸² Kracauer, *Salaried*, 101. : Kracauer, *Angestellten*, 109.

employees' relationships with one another, with their bosses, their unions, and finally – with a culture of distraction targeted at them specifically. The first discourse is concerned with what Kracauer identifies as the “dreadfulness of normal existence” – an existence indelibly influenced by the climate of pervasive rationalization in Weimar Germany, a climate that affected one group, *die Angestellten*, most profoundly.

Who are *die Angestellten*?

Die Angestellten were “discovered” as objects of study shortly before World War One.³⁸³ Sociologist Emil Lederer's pioneering study, *Die Privatangestellten in der modernen Wirtschaftsentwicklung* appeared in 1912, and he continued to publish on the topic throughout the 20s and 30s.³⁸⁴ For this chapter I have used the sociologist's Carl Dreyfuss' 1933 monograph *Occupation and Ideology of the Salaried Employee (Beruf und Ideologie der Angestellten)*. Dreyfuss's more traditional academic approach corroborates Kracauer on several key points, including on the importance of popular film. Other key Weimar-era works include monographs from Erich Fromm, Hans Speier, and Theodor Geiger.³⁸⁵ These are just some of the best known studies of a group, commonly called “*die Neue Mittelstand*,” or the “New Middle Estate,” which growing rapidly, was a

³⁸³ Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany : Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 156.

³⁸⁴ For Lederer and his context see Jürgen Kocka, "Marxist Social Analysis and the Problem of White-Collar Employees," *State, Culture, and Society* 1, no. 2 (1985): 637-53.

³⁸⁵ Emil Lederer, *Die Privatangestellten in Der Modernen Wirtschaftsentwicklung*, European Sociology. (New York: Arno Press, 1975). Kracauer was familiar with Lederer's work, and cited him in *Die Angestellten*. Kracauer, *Salaried*, 30, 81, 95. Theodor Geiger, *Die Soziale Schichtung Des Deutschen Volkes* (1932). Erich Fromm, *The Working Class in Weimar Germany : A Psychological and Sociological Study* (Leamington Spa, Warwickshire: Berg, 1984). Translation of *Arbeiter und Angestellte am Vorabend des Dritten Reiches*. Hans Speier, *German White-Collar Workers and the Rise of Hitler* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

highly visible and commented on phenomenon of the new republic.³⁸⁶ In *Die Angestellten*, Kracauer reports that in Berlin the situation of die Angestellten “has been utterly transformed since the pre-war years.” He continues: “there are 3.5 million salaried employees in Germany today, of whom 1.2 million are women. Over a period in which the number of workers have not yet doubled, salary earners have multiplied almost five times.”³⁸⁷ The number of salaried employees had been rising since the turn of the century in tandem with shifting social patterns.³⁸⁸

The “New” in *Neue Mittelstand* did not simply refer to a new century but was a new group all together.³⁸⁹ Prior to the twentieth century, the *Mittelstand* consisted largely of shopkeepers, artisans, and other small business men and women, typically a culturally and politically conservative group. As salaried employees in large business concerns or clerks in the new department stores, *die Angestellten* were the product and beneficiaries of industrial concentration and the advanced division of labor, the very forces against which the *Alte Mittelstand* were struggling.³⁹⁰

³⁸⁶ For a historical overview see Jürgen Kocka, *Die Angestellten in Der Deutschen Geschichte 1850-1980 : Vom Privatbeamten Zum Angestellten Arbeitnehmer*, Sammlung Vandenhoeck. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981). See also Günther Schulz, *Die Angestellten Seit Dem 19. Jahrhundert*, Enzyklopädie Deutscher Geschichte ; Bd. 54. (München: Oldenbourg, 2000).

³⁸⁷ Kracauer, *Salaried*, 29. ; Kracauer, *Angestellten*, 11.

³⁸⁸ In his history of Weimar Germany, Eric D. Weitz writes: “between 1885 and 1925, the number of white-collar workers had increased fivefold, while that of manual workers had not even doubled. Strikingly, in 1930, only one-fifth of salaried employees had fathers who pursued a similar occupation. In other words, white-collar labor was one of the few realms of significant social mobility in Germany. [. . . The New Middle Estate’s] numbers, roughly 5.3 million in the 1925 census, surpassed the roughly 4 million members of the old middle class and the independent professions.” Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 156.

³⁸⁹ Following G. Schmoller’s 1897 speech “Was verstehen wir unter dem Mittelstand?” the concept of the *Neue Mittelstand* “facilitated the adoption of the traditional corporate *ständische* connotations of the term *Mittelstand* at a time when these *ständische* structures were in fact crumbling.” Jürgen Kocka, “Class Formation, Interest Articulation, and Public Policy: The Origins of the German White-Collar Class in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” in *Organizing Interests in Western Europe : Pluralism, Corporatism, and the Transformation of Politics*, ed. Suzanne Berger (Cambridge [Eng.] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 130.

³⁹⁰ David Blackbourn, “The Mittelstand in German Society and Politics, 1871-1914,” *Social History* 2, no. 4 (1977): 414.

Yet if their employment circumstances were different, the social aspirations of the old and new *Mittelstand* were markedly similar. Self-consciously *not* proletarian they shared many cultural-social values with the bourgeoisie.³⁹¹ Unlike the proper bourgeoisie, however, the typical *Mittelständler* was more suspicious of change, innovation, and personal exploration, in other words, more conservative. Above all the *Mittelstand* was a group marked by status anxiety, ever fearful of slipping down (or back down, as many *Angestellter* came from working-class families) the social and economic ladder.³⁹² In reality, many members of the *Mittelstand* were in an economic position equal to the proletariat, thus inclusion in what they perceived as a socially privileged estate was paramount, especially for its newest members. The extreme political and economic conditions of Weimar put the self-image and aspirations of status-conscious *Angestellten* to the test.

According to historian Jürgen Kocka, at the beginning of the twentieth century the dividing line between *Arbeiter* (worker) and *Angestellte* (employee) was becoming increasingly distinct.³⁹³ As their numbers grew, the term “*Angestellte*” became an important self-identifier for salaried employees and “the *Angestelltenfrage* emerged politically and socially.”³⁹⁴ Important for the differentiation of employees and workers was the promotion and eventual passage of a distinct white-collar insurance law – the *Angestelltenversicherungsgesetz* (AVG) – enacted in 1911. Legislative language describes

³⁹¹ These aspects of bourgeoisie identity are elaborated in ———, “The German Bourgeoisie: An Introduction,” in *The German Bourgeoisie : Essays on the Social History of the German Middle Class from the Late Eighteenth to the Early Twentieth Century*, ed. David Blackbourn and Richard J. Evans (London ; New York: Routledge, 1991), 9.

³⁹² For a history of the development of the *Neue Mittelstand* question, and in particular the issue of “status panic” see Val Burris, “The Discovery of the New Middle Class,” *Theory and Society* 15, no. 3 (1986).

³⁹³ Kocka argues that the line between *Arbeiter* and *Angestellte* was stronger in Germany than in the U.S., Britain, or France due to Germany’s tradition of bureaucracy, with which salaried persons longed to be associated. Kocka, “Class Formation,” 66-67.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

the goal of giving employees “a higher measure of state support than can be offered to them through the workers insurance.”³⁹⁵ In fact employee associations demanded an insurance system modeled as much as possible after the pension schemes of civil servants.³⁹⁶ The passage of the *AVG* was justified by employees and their legislative supporters on ideological grounds. In a 1911 speech before the Reichstag Clemens von Delbrück explained:

[Employees] by comparison with workers occupy a socially and economically elevated position [. . .] These are persons who are of special importance to their respective company because of their particular expertise [and] special trustworthiness; persons who, owing to their training and the nature of their contract, have positions similar to those of civil servants.³⁹⁷

In this description the “elevated position” and “special importance” of the employee are not tied to specific skills. Their “expertise” remains undefined, and their “trustworthiness” assumed rather than explained. The distinction between employee and worker is not justified on practical grounds; instead it relies on a perceived moral superiority of employees and the work they do that translates into higher social status. These self-conscious members of the “new” middle class were at the heart of the rationalization movement sweeping Germany.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁵ Cited in Jürgen Kocka, "White-Collar Employees and Industrial Society in Imperial Germany," in *The Social History of Politics : Critical Perspectives in West German Historical Writing since 1945*, ed. Georg G. Iggers (Dover, N.H.: Berg, 1985), 134.

³⁹⁶ Kocka, "Class Formation," 73. Employees tried to cast themselves as “*Privatbeamete*,” the private sector equivalents of prestigious civil servants. However, *Angestellten* enjoyed neither the secure benefits and salary of state employees, nor their social standing.

³⁹⁷ Cited in ———, "White-Collar Employees ", 134.

³⁹⁸ The reach of rationalization mania was wide, going all the way into the domestic sphere and women’s bodies. See Atina Grossman, "Girllkultur or Thoroughly Rationalized Female: A New Woman in Weimar Germany?," in *Women in Culture and Politics : A Century of Change*, ed. Judith Friedlander (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). ; Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces : Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany*,

Rationalization in Weimar Germany

Consider the following contemporary description of modern office:

The chairs and desks of the female employees were mounted on roller tracks, so that, sitting at their desks, they rode back and forth in front of the filing cabinets. In this way they were spared the effort of bending down to lift up sections, and also saved time. [. . .] This office contained ‘efficiency’ desks, to which even the older employees had become accustomed. These desks provided the most rationalized place and position for ink stand, note book and grooves for pencils.³⁹⁹

Like workers on a factory line, the employees in this office are positioned to achieve the maximum amount of work with minimal physical exertion. Even older employees have accepted that the smallest personal decisions, such as where to place notebooks and pencils, are now decreed from above.

The ‘rationalization’ that Weimar Germans were familiar with had roots in the large-scale developments that Weber had described but was understood primarily as a specific set of techniques and principles targeted towards increasing the efficiency of production in many areas of life.⁴⁰⁰ Historian Mary Nolan offers a useful summary:

At the factory level, rationalization meant increasing productivity by integration and consolidation, technological modernization and labor process reorganization, the assembly line, and the time and motion studies of Frederick W. Taylor. It implied a

Weimar and Now ; 27. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 74-91. ; Mary Nolan, *Visions of Modernity : American Business and the Modernization of Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 206-26. For sex and reproduction rationalization specifically, see Atina Grossman, "The New Woman and the Rationalization of Sexuality in Weimar Germany," in *Powers of Desire : The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Barr Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983).

³⁹⁹ Fritz Giese, “Monschenbehandlung beim Büropersonal,” *Worksleiter*, 2. Jahrgang, Heft 5 p. 148. Cited in Dreyfuss, Vol. I., 68.

⁴⁰⁰ See “Imaging America: Fordism and Technology” in Kaes, Jay, and Dimendberg, *W.R.S.B.*, 393-411.

new worker, who would embrace the idea of productivity in the factory and restructure his life outside according to the principles of discipline, order, and efficiency. For some, rationalization also meant new consumer products, improved marketing, and enhanced consumption possibilities.⁴⁰¹

As Nolan demonstrates, rationalization measures were not limited to the process of production but were promoted at both work and home, and tasked with creating a new kind of worker, consumer, and even political citizen. German proponents of rationalization looked to America, particularly to the ideas of Frederick W. Taylor, an expert on “scientific management,” and to the pioneer of the modern assembly line, Henry Ford.⁴⁰² In his 1911 book, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, Taylor wrote “the best management is a true science, resting upon clearly defined laws, rules, and principles, as a foundation.” He argued further that the principles of scientific management were “applicable to all kinds of human activities.”⁴⁰³ Taylor believed his approach would eliminate the conflicts between worker and employer by maximizing productivity and thus prosperity for both of these traditionally antagonistic groups.

For its advocates on opposing sides of the political divide, rationalization appeared as a potential cure for the ills of the republic. Businesses hoped increased efficiency would compensate for the setbacks of a lost war, an inflation crisis, and, after 1929, a worldwide economic depression. More ambitiously they believed in what historian Detlev J.K. Peukert describes as the “grand ambitions of social engineering,” that “scientific management and the integration of workers into the *Werksgemeinschaft*

⁴⁰¹ Mary Nolan, "Imagining America, Modernizing Germany," in *Dancing on the Volcano : Essays on the Culture of the Weimar Republic*, ed. Thomas W. Kniesche and Stephen Brockmann (Columbia, SC, USA: Camden House, 1994), 72-72. See also Nolan, *Visions of Modernity*.

⁴⁰² Ford's biography was a bestseller in Germany. See Jacoby, *The Bureaucratization of the World*.

⁴⁰³ Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, iv.

(work community) would dissolve class conflict.”⁴⁰⁴ In other words, rationalization promised “an escape from having to accept class confrontation and social division.”⁴⁰⁵ Unions also tended to accept rationalization measures, if less enthusiastically than employers, not because they believed, like Taylor, that greater profits for the capitalist would translate to higher wages for the workers, but because they counted on benefits such as extended welfare measures and a shorter working day, to offset the negatives.⁴⁰⁶

The belief that the best management is “true science” meant that, in 1920s Germany, the rationalized factory model was applied to the office and sales floor. Tasks were timed and standardized with the help of new technologies such as “typewriters, calculating machines, [and] card punchers.”⁴⁰⁷ Rationalization also included the deployment of modern psychological techniques meant to engineer modern workers.⁴⁰⁸ As historian Eric D. Weitz explains: “Workers were to be tested, observed, trained, and managed—incessantly. As a result, managers assumed more power and the pace of work intensified.”⁴⁰⁹ ‘Science’ was the purported impartial arbiter behind these measures, but as Charles Maier concludes, the “findings of science tended to confirm the approach of management, not labor.”⁴¹⁰ For example, the political scientist and rationalization apologist, Wilhelm Kalveram, argues in a 1929 essay that while rationalization can result in “serious social problems,” such as making some employees obsolete, it ultimately benefits everyone: “The rationalization of office operations, if it is carried out in the

⁴⁰⁴ Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic : The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 114.

⁴⁰⁵ Charles Maier, "Between Taylorism and Technocracy: European Ideologies and the Vision of Industrial Productivity in the 1920s," *Journal of Contemporary History* 5 (1970): 29.

⁴⁰⁶ Yet as Peukert argues, the republic was never able to deliver on its promises to workers and employees, a failure which fatally undermined its legitimacy See Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*. Especially 112-115.

⁴⁰⁷ Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 157.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁰ Maier, "Between Taylorism and Technocracy ": 31.

proper spirit, has to result in an increase in per capita productivity and the living standards of the general population, and therefore lead to new employment opportunities.”⁴¹¹ However he fails to explain how to achieve the “proper spirit” or how it will ensure “new employment opportunities.” Here Kalveram betrays a near mystical belief that rationalization is uniformly good. Kracauer recognizes that such conviction is based, not on science, but on faith and contends: “All arguments in favor of the prevailing economic system are based on belief in a preordained harmony.”⁴¹²

Both the promoters and critics of rationalization acknowledged the changing nature of white-collar work in Weimar Germany, namely – the depersonalization of the work process and the resulting employee insecurity and alienation. As an army of “mutually interchangeable private soldiers,” employees were constantly reminded that they were replaceable.⁴¹³ In an interview Kracauer asks an office manager: “If ever, Heaven forbid, you should suddenly fall ill . . . can someone else take your place at once and assume control?” After the manager replies in the affirmative, Kracauer reflects on his answer. “He feels tremendously flattered because his foresight in contriving to be replaceable at all times is recognized.”⁴¹⁴ However, this situation, as much as it might “flatter,” had a darker side. As Hans Speier explains, in interwar Germany an employee at any level was in constant danger of losing his job “regardless of his performance.”⁴¹⁵ Rather than acknowledge the vagaries of a changing economy, management kept the why

⁴¹¹ Wilhelm Kalveram, "Rationalization and Business Management " in *W.R.S.B.*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 185-86. Kracauer addresses Kalveram directly, see Kracauer, *Salaried*, 97. ; *Angestellten*, 31.

⁴¹² Kracauer, *Salaried*, 97. ; *Angestellten*, 103.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 30. ; *Ibid.*, 13. With this phrase Kracauer echoes Marx, who referred many times to the “industrial reserve army” produced by international capitalism.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 41-42. ; *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴¹⁵ Speier, 74.

behind promotion and dismissal mysterious. Employees were only aware of their own small tasks in the enterprise, and major decisions were simply pronounced from above.

The rationalized division of labor (as so well described by Simmel), results in the depersonalization of work; laborers perform as functionaries, not people. In a modern firm individuals lack perspective on the overall process of production, or of “even a single transaction.”⁴¹⁶ Kracauer notes that even positions that allow for a more individual work style, such as salesperson, are increasingly regulated. For example, with the advent of fixed prices, sales clerks have less control of transactions, and their “duties are mechanized.”⁴¹⁷ Employees become as interchangeable as mechanical parts, or, as in Kracauer’s words, “a fragmentary function [*Teilfunktion*]”⁴¹⁸

Even the rationalization cheerleader Kalveram acknowledges that individual employees are excluded “from the overall context of the work process.” In fact, “employees have no need of individual experience, of memory, because the processes run mechanically and someone else can quickly take their place.” Kalveram admits that this depersonalization is a problem – for *employers*, as it “impedes the employees’ full devotion to their assignments.” Therefore “an attempt must be made to preserve the employees’ feeling of duty and pleasure at work.”⁴¹⁹

Die Angestellten includes an examination of the two major ways employers try to nurture feelings of “duty and pleasure at work.” One is by assuring employees of the middle-class nature of white-collar work; the second is to provide extra-office activities and entertainment. Both of these techniques rely on the ‘scientific’ findings of

⁴¹⁶ Dreyfuss, Vol. I., 76-77.

⁴¹⁷ Kracauer, *Salaried*, 30. ; *Angestellten*, 12.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 44. ; *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴¹⁹ Kalveram, "Rationalization," 186.

psychology. Kracauer points out the fallacy behind such thinking: “At one moment it [science] is supposed to rationalize firms and at another create the cheerful mood that it has rationalized away.”⁴²⁰

Employees are encouraged to think of themselves as specially selected and trained middle-class professionals.⁴²¹ In the essay “Selection” (*Auslese*), Kracauer details the processes of “industrial psychology” that determine “telephone girl or shorthand typist.”⁴²² He quotes from a management announcement: “Let everyone be employed at the job he is best capable of performing – according to his abilities, his knowledge, his psychological and physical qualities: according, in short, to the specific character of his whole personality. The right person in the right place!” Kracauer’s commentary on this mantra is brief, but devastating: “whole personality, right person and right place: these words drawn from the dictionary of a defunct idealist philosophy give the impression that what is involved in the test procedures currently being implemented is a genuine selection of persons.”⁴²³ The truth is that in a rationalized working environment personality is superfluous. Kracauer continues:

Thanks to the intellectual labor invested in the equipment, its handmaidens are spared the possession of knowledge; if attendance at commercial college were not compulsory, they would need to know nothing at all. The mysteries of the firm too are a closed book to them, since they deal only with figures. Just one thing is

⁴²⁰ Kracauer, *Salaried*, 44. ; *Angestellten*, 32.

⁴²¹ Kracauer calls “certificates and diplomas” the “handsome weapons” of the middle class. *Ibid.*, 34. ; *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴²² *Ibid.*, 37, 35. ; *Ibid.*, 20, 22.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 35. ; *Ibid.*, 19.

required of them: attention. This cannot wander free but is under the control of the apparatus it controls.⁴²⁴

Education is but a social distinction, the knowledge it produces in itself is useless. New technologies mean employees are but “handmaidens” to machines and procedures. In Kracauer’s presentation *die Angestellten* appear more subordinate to the rationalized work process than even industrial workers. He argues that when employees perform work for which they have no broader context, they are “controlled” – and not just at the office, but also by a system that demands they acquire a sham education.

In his review of *Die Angestellten* Walter Benjamin asks: “in all articles on imbuing wage labor with fresh, more spiritual and deeper values, is it a matter less of vocabulary than of a perversion of language itself, which covers the shabbiest reality with the most intimate word, the vilest with the most refined, the most hostile with the most peaceable?”⁴²⁵ The lie behind management’s “prating about personality” is the implication that the employer’s primary concern is not profit, but that their employees find fulfilling work.⁴²⁶ In reality, managers recognize work aptitude tests and training certificates as tools that encourage employees to identify with their employers (a move that would be nearly unthinkable for wageworkers).

Despite their tenuous economic and social position, most employees *do* consider their social position to be closer to that of their bosses than to the proletariat. In Weberian terms *die Angestellten* constitute a *Stand* (estate) – a grouping based on a “social

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 42. ; Ibid., 29.

⁴²⁵ Walter Benjamin, “An Outsider Attracts Attention,” in *Salaried*, 112. ; “Politisierung der Intelligenz” in *Angestellten*, 120.

⁴²⁶ Kracauer, *Salaried*, 44. ; *Angestellten*, 32.

estimation of honor” – rather than economic reality.⁴²⁷ Education plays an important role in maintaining the *standish* mentality of *die Angestellten*. (Both Arendt and Bauman, discussed in Chapter Four, will also argue that status-hunger is a powerful motivator for officials). As Weber writes of this group:

[They] have to be *educated* in quite a definite way, and who therefore (it must be added) have the character of a definite *estate*. It is no coincidence that we see commercial high schools, trade and technical colleges springing up like mushrooms everywhere [evidence of . . .] the desire to be assimilated into the strata of so-called ‘society.’ Nothing is further from the minds of this class than solidarity with the proletariat; indeed, their aim is, rather, to differentiate themselves increasingly from the proletariat.⁴²⁸

Employers benefit from *die Angestellten*’s status consciousness which discourages their subordinates from joining with workers to demand greater equality in the production process.

While Weber recognized the importance of cultivating social status, he did not consider how participation in mass culture might perform a similar role to education in this process. The analysis of consumption and culture is left to practitioners of the second discourse. This analysis begins with Simmel, who described how individuals could fight back against the depersonalization wrought by rationalization by differentiating themselves in the social marketplace of the modern metropolis. Although Simmel

⁴²⁷ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 932.

⁴²⁸ “Socialism” (1918) in ———, *Political Writings*, 293-94. Originally published as a pamphlet. Henri Band also makes a connection between Weber’s and Kracauer’s respective analyses of the status concerns of the lower middle class. See Henri Band, “Siegfried Kracauer’s Expedition in Die Alltagswelt Der Berliner Angestellten ” in *Siegfried Kracauer : Zum Werk Des Romanciers, Feuilletonisten, Architekten, Filmwissenschaftlers Und Soziologen*, ed. Andreas Volk (Zürich: Seismo, 1996), 223.

understood self-definition through consumption to be a response to the division of labor, he did not see mass culture as a tool of the capitalist for maintaining a compliant producing (and consuming) population. Kracauer would in fact be one of “the first to describe the functional connection between work and leisure.”⁴²⁹

II. *Die Angestellten* at Play

The Business of Pleasure

Just as he penetrated the glossy surface of pro-rationalization management-speak to reveal a much more dissolute reality, Kracauer employed the same technique of surface investigation when he turned to the products of mass culture. His originality lay in his recognition that it was not just the firms, but also an entire culture that determined the existence of the employee, a culture that operated both in and outside of the workplace. In *Die Angestellten* and *The Mass Ornament* Kracauer parallels Weimar Berlin’s cabarets and theme taverns, or “pleasure barracks [*Pläsierkasernen*],” with the office, arguing: “At the same moment at which firms are rationalized, these establishments rationalize the pleasures of the salary-earning armies.”⁴³⁰ This employee culture was characterized by what Miriam Hansen calls “the compensatory economy between the everyday drudgery of business and the business of entertainment.”⁴³¹ Whereas Simmel believed this “compensatory economy” could provide opportunities for

⁴²⁹ Mülder-Bach, 5. See also Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, 165.

⁴³⁰ Kracauer, *Salaried*, 91. ; *Angestellten*, 95-96.

⁴³¹ Hansen, "America, Paris, the Alps," 383.

self-distinction, Kracauer argues “the business of entertainment” exists primarily to keep employees compliantly engaged in the “business of work.”⁴³²

In this vein, many of Kracauer’s Weimar essays analyze employee participation in what Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno would later term “the culture industry.”⁴³³ In *Die Angestellten*’s only essay devoted exclusively to leisure and consumption, “Shelters for the homeless” (*Asyl für Obdachlose*), Kracauer describes employees’ drive for “distraction.” He writes “where they flock together, as in Berlin, special shelters from the homeless are erected.”⁴³⁴ *Die Angestellten* are particularly drawn to these shelters because, unlike “the average worker” whose life “is roofed over with vulgar-Marxist concepts,” they are “spiritually homeless.”⁴³⁵ He continues:

Nothing is more characteristic of this [employee] life, which only in a restricted sense can be called life, than its view of higher things. Not as substance but as glamour. Yielded not through concentration, but in distraction [*Zerstreuung*]. [. . .] ‘Home’, by the way, should be taken to mean not just lodging, but an everyday existence outlined by advertisements in magazines for employees. These mainly concern: pens, Kohinoor pencils; hemorrhoids; hair loss; beds; crepe soles; white teeth; rejuvenation elixirs; selling coffee to friends; Dictaphones;

⁴³² Kracauer, *Salaried*, 91. ; *Angestellten*, 95.

⁴³³ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic* For Kracauer as precursor to this work see: Mülder-Bach, 12., Koch, 35., Levin, “Introduction” to *Mass Ornament*, 3., Hansen, “Decentric Perspectives,” 60. Schlüpmann, “Phenomonology of Film.”

⁴³⁴ Kracauer, *Salaried*, 91. ; *Angestellten*, 95. Hoare translates “*Asyl*” as “shelter” both here and in the essay’s title. The literal translation of “*Asyl*” is “asylum,” however, “shelter” fits with the architectural metaphor that Kracauer uses throughout the essay. “*Geistig*” can be translated as “intellectually” (as Sabrina Hake does). A case can be made for either as the German *Geist* can mean both spirit and intellect. I prefer the broader “spiritually” in this context.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 88. ; *Ibid.*, 91.

writer's cramp; trembling, especially in the presence of others; quality pianos on weekly installments; and so on.⁴³⁶

Kracauer is generally sympathetic to employees but his tone becomes condescending when he discusses life outside the office.⁴³⁷ In an earlier essay he acknowledged the importance of an attractive and youthful appearance when job-seeking, but in "Shelters," he criticizes employees for their easy susceptibility to frivolous products and pursuits. He describes the lives of *die Angestellten* as lacking substance and characterizes them as living life only "in a restricted sense." Even their homes have been colonized by the culture of empty consumption.

Kracauer cites an employee union's study that concludes "employees do indeed devote less money to food than the average worker, but they rate so-called cultural needs more highly."⁴³⁸ This hunger for middle class distinction is encouraged by employers. A department store brochure claims employees from "modest background" will benefit from contact with "refined and well-educated" customers.⁴³⁹ Company newsletters explain how one only needs to budget properly in order to afford the finer things in life. As with industrial psychology, these are but false promises, as Kracauer argues that a

⁴³⁶ Ibid. ; Ibid.

⁴³⁷ As an example of his sympathy, consider Kracauer's dismissal of claims that employees were to blame for their unemployment. In the essay "Repair Shop" ("*Reparaturwerkstatt*"), he writes: "Laid-off workers do not go on the dole for pleasure, and cases of reluctance to work are exceptions. An hour's object lesson in the waiting-rooms of any labor exchange would be highly desirable for everybody." Ibid., 66. ; Ibid., 63.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 89. ; Ibid., 92. A 1928 study by the Reich Statistical Office reached similar conclusions, showing that white-collar employees "after allowing for food, spent more on personal hygiene, clothing, household goods, holidays, and leisure and recreational activities than did their working-class counterparts." Results and brief commentary on the study are in Anthony McElligott, *The German Urban Experience, 1900-1945 : Modernity and Crisis* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2001), 133. For an analysis of the relationship between status and consumption, see Henri Band, *Mittelschichten Und Massenkulture: Siegfried Kracauer Puplicistische Auseinandersetzung Mit Der Populären Kultur unter Kulture Der Mittelschichten in Der Weimarer Republik.* (Berlin: Lukas Verlag, 1999).

⁴³⁹ Kracauer, *Salaried*, 89. ; *Angestellten*, 92.

taste of glamour “is indeed supposed to bind the mass of employees to society – but to raise them only just so far that they will remain more certainly in their appointed place.”⁴⁴⁰ These “higher things” help shore-up the middle-class identity of *die Angestellten*, and at the same time, keep them from protesting their proletariat-like working conditions.

Employee “shelters” included places like “Haus Vaterland” where the spirit of 19th century panoramas was revived through facades of far-away splendors – from the American Wild West to “Mohammedan halls.”⁴⁴¹ At the Moka-Efti-Lokal, Kracauer describes “a moving staircase, whose functions presumably include symbolizing the easy ascent to the higher social strata, [which] conveys ever new crowds from the street directly to the Orient, denoted by columns and harem gratings.”⁴⁴² Why the clamoring after such exotic fantasies?

The more monotony holds sway over the working day, the further away you must be transported once work ends – assuming that attention is to be diverted from the process of production in the background. The true counter-stroke against the office machine, however, is the world vibrant with color. The world not as it is, but as it appears in popular hits. A world every last corner of which is cleansed, as though with a vacuum cleaner, of the dust of everyday existence.⁴⁴³

The fantasy world of entertainment is a legitimate “counterstroke” against the daily grind of work. Ultimately however, this colorful world distracts from reality, making it impossible to alter the world “as it is.”

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 90. ; Ibid., 94.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 92-93.; Ibid., 97.

⁴⁴² Ibid., 93. ; Ibid., 97

⁴⁴³ Ibid. ; Ibid.

“Little Shopgirls”

For Simmel, the metropolis offered the chance for individuals to fight the depersonalization of rationalized labor and gain back a measure of autonomy by re-distinguishing oneself in extra-work pursuits. In Kracauer’s view, *die Angestellten* are as good as drugged by the entertainment industry and just as subject to rationalization and standardization by it as by their bosses.⁴⁴⁴ In the essay “A few choice specimens” (“*Kleines Herbarium*”) he reports:

Salaried employees today live in masses, whose existence – especially in Berlin and the other big cities – increasingly assumes a standard character [*ein einheitliches Gepräge*]. [We see] the emergence of certain standard types [*Normaltypen*] of salesgirl, draper’s assistant [*Konfektionären*], shorthand typist [*Stenotypistinnen*] and so on, which are portrayed and at the same time cultivated in magazines and cinemas. They have entered the general consciousness, which from them forms its overall image of the new salaried stratum [*neuen Angestelltenschicht*]. The question is whether the image decisively catches reality.⁴⁴⁵

In this description of “standard” employee characters, the examples Kracauer uses -- salesgirl, draper’s assistant, shorthand typist – are all female. The much-discussed “New Woman” of Weimar, a financially independent, pleasure-seeking, modern city “girl” was

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 94. ; Ibid., 99. Kracauer finds that some individuals do manage to become fully human again in their off hours. He describes a group of male employees in a dive bar who “metamorphosed before my eyes. They were no longer repressed office employees, but real elemental forces breaking out of their cage and enjoying themselves in quite reckless ways.” However, Kracauer suggests this transformation was only possible because these employees are older and developed their personalities before the reign of rationalization. Younger people “adapt themselves more or less easily to the firm.” Kracauer, *Salaried*, 70. ; *Angestellten*, 67-68.

⁴⁴⁵ Kracauer, *Salaried*, 68. ; *Angestellten*, 65.

often depicted as a member of *die Angestellten*.⁴⁴⁶ Kracauer noted in his book's opening essay, the "utter transformation" of *die Angestellten* included the high number of female employees.⁴⁴⁷ As historian Ute Frevert's explains: "The presence of so many single women in white-collar positions was one of the notable developments of the Weimar economy."⁴⁴⁸ This new reality was simultaneously exciting and threatening. Salaried work meant new opportunities for many women. At the same time, old attitudes about what kind of work was appropriate for women, and what kind of women worked, persisted. Female employees typically had lower rates of pay, less autonomy on the job, and fewer chances for career advancement than their male colleagues.⁴⁴⁹

Due to their weaker earning power, few women were capable of living-out the myth of the financially independent New Woman. Without questioning its fairness, Kracauer acknowledges as much, noting that female employees who live on their own need a male "friend" if they are to take full advantage of the consuming opportunities presented by the metropolis. He writes that the most sensible girls forgo such friendships, live with their parents, and take pains to distinguish themselves from make-up wearing "girls of easy virtue" who "eat slap-up meals in male company at Kempinski's." These respectable girls

⁴⁴⁶ The English term "girl" was often used to point to the New Woman's 'American' qualities. For primary sources and commentary, see "The Rise of the New Woman" in Kaes, Jay, and Dimendberg, *W.R.S.B.*, 195-219.

⁴⁴⁷ Kracauer, *Salaried*, 29. ; *Angestellten*, 11.

⁴⁴⁸ Ute Frevert, *Women in German History : From Bourgeois Emancipation to Sexual Liberation* (Oxford ; New York: Berg, 1989), 177. By "1925 there were almost one-and-a-half million female white-collar workers – three times as many as in 1907, which represented a jump from 5 to 12.6 per cent of all women in work," 177. Of these, most were, like the stereo-typical New Woman, young (under twenty-five) and single, 179. See also Susanne Suhr, *Die Weiblichen Angestellten: Arbeits-Und Lebensverhältnisse* (Berlin: 1930).

⁴⁴⁹ In fact: "Wage agreements for commercial white-collar workers in Weimar Germany stipulated that pay for women across the board should be 10-25 per cent lower. The reason proffered was that men generally had higher clothing and living expenses than did women, who could knit, sew, darn and cook." Frevert, *Women*, 178. This institutionalized discrimination was in line with female employees' experiences in the pre-Weimar era, see Carole Elizabeth Adams, *Women Clerks in Wilhelmine Germany : Issues of Class and Gender* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

(and presumably make-up wearing ones too) long for marriage and a husband who “earns so much that they no longer need work.”⁴⁵⁰ Female employment was generally considered temporary and employers needing to downsize relied on “natural wastage” – young women leaving the workforce voluntarily when “they feel old age approaching.”⁴⁵¹ For many women, a job “functioned merely as a temporary place of safe-keeping” before their wedding day.⁴⁵² Marriage and motherhood, believed to be incompatible with work outside the home, was still the goal for most.

Kracauer warns that if women wait too long to secure a husband, they may find themselves jobless with little prospects for employment or marriage. Writing about female employees dismissed before retirement-age, Kracauer claims: “their own foolishness is often to blame for the girls’ misfortune. Since they can manage quite tolerably on a salary augmented by office bonuses, they shrink from any marriage in which they do worse materially.”⁴⁵³ Of these “salaried-bohemian” girls “who come to the big city in search of adventure and roam like comets through the world of salaried employees,” Kracauer concludes that “even the best astronomer cannot determine whether they will end up in the street or in the marriage bed.”⁴⁵⁴ As Jill Suzanne Smith points out, in this passage Kracauer “merges images of shopgirls and secretaries with those of prostitutes.”⁴⁵⁵ His analysis suggests that whatever new opportunities the modern Weimar economy and culture brought, women’s choices were ultimately very limited.

⁴⁵⁰ Kracauer, *Salaried*, 71. ; *Angestellten*, 69.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 54. ; *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁵² Frevert, *Women*, 179.

⁴⁵³ Kracauer, *Salaried*, 54. ; *Angestellten*, 46.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 73. ; *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴⁵⁵ Jill Suzanne Smith, "Working Girls: White-Collar Workers and Prostitutes in Late Weimar Fiction," *The German Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (2008): 450.

Kracauer's discussion of female employees evidences both a realistic acknowledgement of their tenuous condition and their sexist treatment. Yet, his characterization of women as particularly susceptible to the fantasies offered-up by magazines and movies reflects a prejudice as old as the analysis of mass culture itself – that its consumption is a passive activity, rendering one weak, feminine, and “small.”⁴⁵⁶ Kracauer often uses “little” to describe his subjects (as in “Little Miss Typist”). Employees in general were often described as small. One of the most popular novels of the Weimar-era, about an unemployed retail clerk, was entitled *Little Man, What Now?* (*Kleiner Mann, Was Nun?*).⁴⁵⁷

Another bestselling novel, Irmgard Keun's *The Artificial Silk Girl* (*Das kunstseidene Mädchen*) provides a sympathetic but bleak portrait of a young woman, Doris, who's attempt to live her life according to the examples she sees in movies is ultimately self-destructive.⁴⁵⁸ While planning to pursue a career as an actress, Doris works for an attorney who constantly pressures her to engage in sexual relations.

Although she rejects her boss's advances, Doris does sleep with other men for food and

⁴⁵⁶ Kracauer did not reject popular culture out of hand. As Hansen explains: “Kracauer (like Benjamin) did not object to serial production, standardization, and commodification as such.” She continues, “his critique was aimed less against the lure of cinematic identification in general than against the cultural and political practices responsible for the unrealistic tendency of such identification, the growing denial of the discrepancies of the social process.” Hansen, “America, Paris, the Alps,” 377.

⁴⁵⁷ Hans Fallada, *Little Man - What Now?*, trans. Susan Bennett (London: Libris, 1996). Novels featuring members of *die Angestellten* were popular during the Weimar years. *Kleiner Mann, Das kunstseidene Mädchen*, and several others are discussed in Christa Jordan, *Zwischen Zerstreuung Und Berausung : Die Angestellten in Der Erzählprosa Am Ende Der Weimarer Republik*, Studien Zur Deutschen Literatur Des 19. Und 20. Jahrhunderts, Bd. 7. (Frankfurt am Main ; New York: P. Lang, 1988). See also Jenny Williams, “Hans Fallada's Literary Breakthrough: *Bauren, Bonzen Und Bomben* and *Kleiner Mann -- Was Nun?*,” in *German Novelists of the Weimar Republic : Intersections of Literature and Politics*, ed. Karl Leydecker (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006).; Deborah Smail, *White-Collar Workers, Mass Culture and Neue Sachlichkeit in Weimar Berlin : A Reading of Hans Fallada's Kleiner Mann--Was Nun?, Erich Kästner's Fabian and Irmgard Keun's Das Kunstseidene Mädchen* (Bern ; New York: P. Lang, 1999). And Marion Heister, *Winzige Katastrophen : Eine Untersuchung Zur Schreibweise Von Angestelltenromanen* (Frankfurt am Main ; New York: P. Lang, 1989). For a review of female-centered literature on white-collar work in the 1920s see Lawrence Rainey, “Fables of Modernity: The Typist in Germany and France,” *Modernism/modernity* 11, no. 2 (2004).

⁴⁵⁸ Irmgard Keun, *The Artificial Silk Girl*, trans. Katharina von Ankum (New York: Other Press, 2002).

small presents. Her feelings for these men are lukewarm but their gifts help her approximate a glamorous life-style that she could not afford on her own.⁴⁵⁹ More at home in the world of fantastical entertainments than in her frustrating work and family life, Doris even models her diary along cinematic lines. "I want to write like a movie, because my life is like that and it's going to become even more so. [. . .] everything will be like at the movies – I'm looking at myself in the pictures."⁴⁶⁰ Doris could be one of those hopefuls that Kracauer describes in the 1927 essay "Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies."⁴⁶¹

Employees on Screen

In "Shopgirls," Kracauer argues "Films are the mirror of the prevailing society."⁴⁶² While a profit-seeking producer must satisfy "the tastes of the audience," he "will never allow himself to be driven to present material that in any way attacks the foundations of society, for to do so would destroy his own existence as a capitalist entrepreneur."⁴⁶³ Because they must give the audience what they want while at the same time holding up social and economic norms, popular films have an inherent tension

⁴⁵⁹ Doris wears artificial silk because she cannot afford the real thing.

⁴⁶⁰ Keun, *The Artificial Silk Girl*, 3.

⁴⁶¹ Patrice Petro tackles the complex problem of Weimar female spectatorship by building on, and critiquing, Kracauer. See Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets : Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar, Germany* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989). Also see Patrice Petro, "Perceptions of Difference: Woman as Spectator and Spectacle," in *Women in the Metropolis : Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, ed. Katharina von Ankum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁴⁶² For film consumption statistics in 1920s and 30s Germany, and a sharp analysis of them, see Corey Ross, "Mass Culture and Divided Audiences: Cinema and Social Change in Inter-War Germany," *Past & Present* 193, No 1, no. November (2006). The literature on Weimar mass culture is large, but see especially Stephan and Anthony Phelan Lamb, "Weimar Culture: The Birth of Modernism," in *German Cultural Studies : An Introduction*, ed. Rob Burns (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁴⁶³ Kracauer, *Mass Ornament*, 291. ; Kracauer, *Das Ornament* 279.

which can be exploited by the critic.⁴⁶⁴ Thomas Levin has suggested that Kracauer's interests in the phenomena of mass culture, and particularly his innovative look at film and its reception, grew out of his investigation of employee culture.⁴⁶⁵ Levin credits *The Mass Ornament* with being "one of the first sustained attempts at cinema theory, intricately embedding the discussion of film within a much broader spectrum of cultural theory" – as opposed to analyzing films solely on aesthetic grounds.⁴⁶⁶ Kracauer argues that while mainstream films might not count as art, they are all the more deserving of critical attention. For the poorer they "are in holding their own against strict aesthetic judgment, the weightier become their social significance."⁴⁶⁷ Kracauer tells us that films are inadvertently "blabbing a rude secret," namely "how society wants to see itself." To break the spell of "the sum of society's ideologies" Kracauer interprets a few "textbook cases."⁴⁶⁸

He finds that plots in employee-centered films reflect the myths that circulate in the actual office. In films, employees are handsomely rewarded with career or social advancement for their hard work, firm loyalty, and sexual morality. The appearance of employees on the screen is no accident; like the rhetoric of advancement in real firms, films help ensure the prevailing order. Plots featuring members of *die Angestellten* were

⁴⁶⁴ Adorno credited Kracauer with decoding "film as ideology," by recognizing: that when a medium desired and consumed by the masses transmits an ideology that is internally consistent and cohesive, this ideology is presumably adapting to the needs of the consumers as much as, conversely, it is progressively shaping them. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, 66.

⁴⁶⁵ Levin, "The Mass Ornament," 25.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid. See also Jay, *Permanent Exiles*, 156. And Hansen, "Decentric Perspectives," 59.

⁴⁶⁷ Kracauer, "The Task of the Film Critic" (1932) in Kaes, Jay, and Dimendberg, *W.R.S.B.*, 634. Kracauer makes a similar point in "The Mass Ornament," arguing "the aesthetic pleasure gained from ornamental mass movements is legitimate." After all, "The masses organized in these movements come from office and factories; the formal principle according to which they are molded determines them in reality as well." Therefore the potential exists for the masses to recognize their own reality in the products of mass culture. Whatever its value as art, the mass ornament's "degree of reality is still higher than that of artistic productions which cultivate outdated noble sentiments in obsolete forms." Kracauer, *Mass Ornament*, 79. *Das Ornament*, 54-55.

⁴⁶⁸ Kracauer, *Mass Ornament*, 294.; *Das Ornament*, 282.

popular themes of Weimar cinema, and “the single largest segment” of the audience was the employees themselves.⁴⁶⁹ Films depicted individual tragedies and transgressions but not “the real social crimes” of widespread poverty and destitution. “All mention of class difference is avoided” and redemption is singular as “saving individual people is a convenient way to prevent the rescue of the entire class.”⁴⁷⁰ People are encouraged to think of themselves as individuals, not a group with mutual interests.

Dreyfuss also argues that employees “form a large part of the cinema audience,” and his analysis of employee centered film and their effects supports Kracauer’s conclusions.⁴⁷¹ In the fantasy-world of *Angestellte* films, virtuous female employees are advanced up the social ladder through marriage, and hard-working male employees are rewarded with career advancement (and sometimes marriage too.)⁴⁷²

Motion pictures frequently demonstrate to the audience the possibilities of social and occupational promotion . . . The office employee[s] . . . are shown a world without class contrasts. The film action proves that even the lowest employee can enter the paradise of his dreams. On the screen, the bookkeeper, the salesgirl, and the private secretary who distinguish themselves by their unusual zeal, great interest in their work, strong sense of duty, and exceptional loyalty are welcomed with open arms by the members of the upper class. In most cases, marriage with the employer or the employer’s daughter crown the up-hill struggle.⁴⁷³

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 307. ; Ibid., 295.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., 295. ; Ibid., 284.

⁴⁷¹ Carl Dreyfuss, *Occupation and Ideology of the Salaried Employee*, trans. Eva Abramovitch (New York: Arno Press, 1977), 111.

⁴⁷² Ibid., 110-13.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 112. The fantasy of ‘marrying-up’ was just that – a fantasy. Most female employees married employees of similar social status, or workers. Frevert, *Women*, 182-83.

Dreyfuss provides a detailed synopsis of the 1930 film *Poor as a Church Mouse* (*Arm wie eine Kirchenmaus*), the plot of which demonstrates these fantasies.⁴⁷⁴ The film opens with shots of an office staffed by unproductive employees reading newspapers, conversing, and even knitting. By way of contrast, the heroine, a young stenographer named Susie, is so dedicated to her job she declares “We two, my type-writer and I, belong together.” Her boss’s conduct is also “impeccable,” and he turns down the advances of his first secretary. Instead he takes the diligent Susie on a business trip to Paris where she is instrumental in securing a deal that will help more people find employment. Finally, “the aristocratic bank manager leads her to the altar.” Dreyfuss points out three major fallacies in the plot. Number one, the work ethic of the other employees, has to be portrayed as so laughably poor because in no other way could an individual employee stand out so starkly. Secondly, male bosses were unlikely to turn down advances from attractive subordinates, and often made them themselves. Finally secretaries, “however efficient and diligent,” do not have the power to further business mergers, which in any case lead to fewer jobs, not more. Despite these conditions, it is the business of entertainment to provide the happy ending which Kracauer claims “is not only the dream of many girls but also a tested means of transforming them into compliant instruments.”⁴⁷⁵ These girls may identify with their counterparts on screen, but this identification does not lead them to reflect on their own position. As long as they believe in fantasyland, the little shop-girls are less likely to try and change reality.

⁴⁷⁴ For an analysis of this film that considers gender politics see Angelika Fuhrich, "Women and Typewriter: Gender, Technology, and Work in Late Weimar Film," *Women in German Yearbook* (2000).

⁴⁷⁵ Kracauer, “Working Women” (1932), in *WRSB*.

III. “Revolt of the Middle Classes”

Divided and Conquered

As the tumultuous 1920s came to a close, observers of “The New Middle Class” acknowledged that it had not, as predicted, merged with the proletariat. Kracauer quotes Emil’s Lederer 1929 reassessment of a study he had published just three years earlier: “Even if the capitalist intermediate strata today already share the destiny of the proletariat, the majority of them have nevertheless not yet abandoned their bourgeois ideology.”⁴⁷⁶ In the essay “Among Neighbors,” Kracauer demonstrates how this entrenched ideology leads to a “false consciousness.”

Large sections of the population today do indeed base their bourgeois existence, which is no longer bourgeois at all, on monthly salaries, so-called intellectual labor and a few other similarly trivial characteristics. In total harmony with the experience articulated by Marx: that the superstructure adapts itself only slowly to the development of the base provoked by forces of production. The position of these strata [*Schichten*] in the economic process has changed, their middle-class conception of life [*mittelständische Lebensauffassung*] has remained. They nurture a false consciousness. They would like to defend differences, the acknowledgment of which obscures their situation; they devote themselves to an individualism that would be justified only if they could still shape their fate as individuals.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁶ Kracauer, *Salaried*, 81. ; *Angestellten*, 81.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.* ; *Ibid.*, 81-82.

In Weimar's rationalized economy, the nature of production had changed, for non-manual "intellectual" labor could be as automated as any on the assembly line. Yet "large sections of the population" – *die Neue Mittelstand* – failed to face this reality. Members of this stratum persisted in regarding themselves as middle class and stubbornly defended their separation from workers. Instead of organizing with each other, they clung to an untenable "individualism." This false consciousness provided employers with their two greatest weapons against the political radicalization of *die Angestellten*: the employees' lack of solidarity with each other and their steadfast opposition to making common cause with the proletariat.

Kracauer discusses the unofficial hierarchies of the workplace. Civil servants consider themselves superior to other salaried employees, women working office jobs look down on sales girls, and technical and commercial employees in the same firm each have their reasons for feeling their function is more important. Atomization is encouraged by the structure of the rationalized firm; for, "the more systematic its [the firm's] organization, the less people have to do with one another." Kracauer describes "labyrinthine" big offices as something out of Kafka, where "relations between the spheres of the firm have become even more abstract."⁴⁷⁸ According to Dreyfuss, this fragmentation is a conscious goal of the employer who wants to prevent "the employees of his enterprise from confronting him as a homogenous group." He therefore "attempts to undermine and split their strength through minute subdivision and differentiation."⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 48. ; Ibid., 36.

⁴⁷⁹ Employees are even forbidden from using the informal form of address, "Du," with each other. Dreyfuss, Vol. I., 3-4.

Kracauer cites the encouragement of these prejudices as part of an age-old management technique “*Divide et impera.*”⁴⁸⁰

Yet as Kracauer shows, all the differences between employees “shriveled to mere nuances in comparison with that between workers and salaried employees. This is felt as a class distinction [*klassengegensatz*], although [. . .] it is no longer one.”⁴⁸¹ Concerned with differentiating themselves, many salaried employees make pains to avoid social contact, even the exchange of greetings, with “workers” at the office. At the Central Association of Salaried Employees prospective employees fill out questionnaires stating the preference for commercial work. ““Because I prefer a job that’s not manual”” or ““I wouldn’t like to work in a factory.””⁴⁸² Career choices were not necessarily financial; wages for blue-collar work were comparable. These answers reveal a clear awareness about what type of work job seekers who regarded themselves as, or aspired to be, middle-class should consider.

Employers were also sensitive to employee backgrounds as they benefited from the estate consciousness of *die Angestellten*. In an interview with Kracauer, a manager speaks proudly of the bank’s employees: ““some of them come from good middle-class families [*gutbürgerlichem Haus*]. Their level is definitely not proletarian.””⁴⁸³ It was in the employer’s interest to encourage this bourgeois identification, not only to discourage employees from seeking political solidarity with the proletariat, but also to provide them with compensation for positions with no autonomy, little job security, and low pay.

⁴⁸⁰ Kracauer, *Salaried*, 85. ; *Angestellten*, 87.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 83-84. ; *Ibid.*, 84.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, 33. ; *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, 34. ; *Ibid.*, 18.

Kracauer ends *Die Angestellten* with an essay on the efforts of firm-sanctioned employee trade unions to mitigate the ills of rationalization. Recognizing that “jobs no longer afford any pleasure nowadays,” such groups attempted to salve the “spiritual desolation of the working population” with extra-office activities drawn from the fields of “art, science, radio, and of course, sport.”⁴⁸⁴ Kracauer warns that “to proceed in this way means cordoning off mechanized work like the source of an epidemic,” and that such efforts are doomed to fail.⁴⁸⁵ For the harm of rationalized work:

can be reduced not by a consciousness that looks away from it, but only one that includes it. [. . .] The opinion according to which the drawbacks of mechanization can be eliminated with the help of spiritual contents administered like medicines is itself one further expression of the reification [*Verdinglichung*] against whose effects it is directed.⁴⁸⁶

These “spiritual contents” are no different than the entertainment offered by Berlin’s “pleasure-barracks.” They provide distraction and temporary relief from the working day, but they do not approach the source of the illness. The campaign for an economic order that gives the work of individuals “comprehensive meaning” is undermined when these same individuals are plied with contents that do no change their “relationship to mechanized work.”

The community-building initiatives of such organizations are also bound to fail because they neglect “the human individual,” who “is formed not by community as such but by knowledge.” The socialist’s belief that the mass alone ensures “general well-being” is no different in substance than the capitalist’s conviction that “individual

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 102. ; Ibid., 110.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid. ; Ibid.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid., 102-03. ; Ibid., 110-111.

initiative will do the same.” Thus “collectivity” is merely the opposite pole of the entrepreneur’s private initiative.” When posited as “content in itself,” collectivity is not community, but only the will to it. This collectivism for its own sake can only mean more standardization. For, as Kracauer continues, “In both cases, you accept people without inquiring what relationship they have to the aims in question.” Or, what the aims are in the first place; “general well-being” is never defined. Kracauer concludes: “What matters is not that institutions are changed, what matters is that human individuals change institutions.”⁴⁸⁷

The Rise of *Ratio*

Kracauer was not just skeptical of organized socialism, but of the premise behind the *Burgfrieden* – the post World War One “civil peace” between labor and capital. The supposed harmony between the entrepreneur and the masses was asserted but never explained.⁴⁸⁸ Kracauer warned that as long as both sides failed to address their inherently divergent interests, genuine reconciliation was impossible.

Not that such arguments are not made in good faith; but they do not develop coherently from the logic of capitalism. For if profit-seeking or pleasure in economic power count as guarantees of order, a social outlook [*soziale*

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 106. ; Ibid., 115. Here, in the closing lines of *Die Angestellten*, Kracauer asserts his “concern for the integrity of the individual personality.” Jay, *Permanent Exiles*, 163. Historian Peter Fritzsche states the case well: “If Kracauer thought in terms of redemption it was a lowercase kind in which an active discussion of historicity and contingency offered evidence that things did not have to be as they are, rather than in the uppercase terms of transcendence and release from history.” Peter Fritzsche, “Critical Realism: History, Photography, and the Work of Siegfried Kracauer (Review),” *Central European History* 30, no. 1 (1997): 146.

⁴⁸⁸ Kracauer, *Salaried*, 97. ; *Angestellten*, 104.

Gessinnung], however conciliatory its intentions, is a bonus suspended ideologically in the void.⁴⁸⁹

This ideal *Werksgemeinschaft* (work community) was ungrounded. For concessions to employees could not be made “on the basis of capitalist assumptions” – a fact proven by their quick retraction whenever they were pitted against “more primitive capitalist desires.” Kracauer argues: “Better suited to these desires than an addition of human feelings is the widespread theory that enterprise [*Unternehmen*] as such is an end in itself.”⁴⁹⁰ When “enterprise as such” is the stated goal – ultimate ends recede from view. Production under these conditions does not to meet the needs of human individuals, but operates for its own sake.⁴⁹¹

Eventually even the entrepreneur [*Unternehmer*] becomes just another part of the system, acting not as an agent, but as a function: “he becomes the servant of his work just as the King of Prussia was the servant of the state.”⁴⁹² As in Weber’s ideal-type bureaucracy, no one is the true author of his actions; the enterprise becomes self-propelling. Eventually:

The work as such is a concept without content, which precisely through its emptiness proves that it merely reflects the entrepreneur’s sovereignty in the objective sphere, without subordinating this sovereignty to anything higher. Even if one replaces the entrepreneur by the enterprise, there is no warrant for any belief in harmony between that enterprise and the desired social construction. The

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 98-99.; Ibid., 106.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., 99. ; Ibid.

⁴⁹¹ Or, as he puts it in the “The Mass Ornament”: “The capitalist production process is an end in itself [*ist sich Selbstzweck*]. The commodities that it spews forth are not actually produced to be possessed; rather they are made for the sake of a profit that knows no limit.” ———, *Mass Ornament*, 81. ; *Das Ornament*, 53.

⁴⁹² ———, *Salaried*, 99. ; *Angestellten*, 106.

Werksgemeinschaft is admittedly supposed to represent the accord between work and community, but rather community serves the accumulation of power of an undefined work.⁴⁹³

The whole society comes to be defined by “the power of undefined work” – work for work’s sake. Even the entrepreneur is not subordinated to sovereignty higher than the needs of the enterprise. The *Werksgemeinschaft* has not amounted to more than a temporary truce between capital and society to serve the needs of production and has never really addressed the “development of true human relations [*richtiger menschlicher Beziehungen*].” When work is emptied of content – people will look for purpose elsewhere.

By the end of 1931, Germany was two years into a worldwide depression and experiencing an economic crisis even more serious than the inflation years of 1923-24. The population was becoming increasingly disparate and radicalized. Political movements on the extreme right and left gained members as the architects of the *Burgfrieden* – the Social Democrats, the liberals, and the Catholic centrists -- were rapidly losing ground. In an essay from December 1931 Kracauer assessed the political situation.

“Revolt of the Middle Classes” (“*Aufrühr der Mittelschichten*”), “An examination of the *Tat* Circle,” looks at the movement surrounding the right-wing journal *Die Tat*. This movement identified the group, which, while extremely frustrated with Weimar democracy, had no ideological apparatus for processing that frustration – the lower middle class. The ideal target of *Die Tat*’s campaign was “a tired petite bourgeois [*müder Kleinbürger*],” for while “the middle classes” have become economically

⁴⁹³ Ibid. ; Ibid., 106-107.

proletarian, “in conceptual [*ideeller*] terms, they are homeless.”⁴⁹⁴ As the middle classes refuse to give up their social distinction by joining with the proletariat, the question becomes: “what means remain available to them for escaping their ideational homelessness?” For, as Kracauer warns: “They are standing in a void and have no choice but to try to develop a new consciousness that will provide the ideational framework for their social survival.”⁴⁹⁵

This void is largely the result of the rationalized economy. Production as an end in itself is propelled not by humanist Reason, but by what Kracauer calls *Ratio* -- instrumental, means-end rationality. In “Revolt,” he writes: “I have tried to sketch the terrible consequences of this *Ratio*-induced disintegration, above all for the middle classes, in my book *Die Angestellten*.”⁴⁹⁶ The leaders of the *Tat* circle also recognize the desperation of *die Angestellten*, but they misjudge the source of employee discontent and do not properly confront “the actual object of its attack.”⁴⁹⁷

This object is *Ratio*, which denies its origins and no longer recognizes any limits, as opposed to reason [*Vernunft*] in general and “liberalist reason” in particular, which is, after all, based on faith in humanity. This unleashed *Ratio* . . . overpowers everything reasonable. . . . Blind *Ratio*; it is this that inspires profit-lust to undertake its transactions, that produces the irresponsibility of a certain type of yellow journalism [*einer gewissen Journaille*], that is to blame for the

⁴⁹⁴ ———, *Mass Ornament*, 121, 22. ; *Das Ornament*, 97, 99.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 123. ; *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 112-13. ; *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 112. ; *Ibid.*, 87.

precipitancy of the process of rationalization and for all those calculations of a degenerate economy which take every factor into account except man.⁴⁹⁸

Ratio is no longer constrained by *Vernunft*, a human-based reason that is not technical, but intellectual – one capable of not only setting means to an end, but of considering the full implications of those ends. Now *Vernunft* has been overpowered by “blind *Ratio*” -- the unrestrained and self-propelling rationalization behind an economy that produces for profits, not people. In “The Mass Ornament,” Kracauer argues that left to its own devices “the capitalist economic system is not reason itself but murky [*getrübt*] reason” – it is abstract *Ratio*, which “*does not encompass man.*”⁴⁹⁹

As Kracauer explains, the problem with capitalism is not that “it rationalizes too much but rather *too little.*”⁵⁰⁰ In contrast to *Ratio*, *Vernunft* not only promotes scientific and technological progress, but can also critically dismantle the abstract ideologies of employers, union leaders, and governments. Under the reign of *Ratio*, the positive work of the Enlightenment – demythologization – has halted and the current “relations of production and the conditions of life that result from them” are treated as unchangeable nature.⁵⁰¹ Only *Vernunft* can restart the process of disenchantment and make way for the “man of reason.”⁵⁰² Fifteen years later, Horkheimer and Adorno, writing in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, echo Kracauer when they argue that the Enlightenment has devolved into a myth. However unlike Kracauer, who still believes that *Vernunft* may reign again,

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., 112-13.; Ibid.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 81. ; Ibid., 81.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid. ; Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

⁵⁰¹ Levin, “The Mass Ornament,” 17.

⁵⁰² Kracauer, *Mass Ornament*, 82. ; *Das Ornament*, 59.

Horkheimer and Adorno argue that all reason has collapsed into instrumental rationality – into *Ratio*.⁵⁰³

***Mittelstand*: The Problem Class**

In “Revolt,” Kracauer places the center of political rebellion in Germany not with the working class or conservative reactionaries, but with “the dispossessed middle classes.”⁵⁰⁴ Kracauer’s identification of the lower middle class as “homeless” is part of an older tradition. Both the high and low discourses rely on a traditional understanding of the German *Mittelstand* and, more broadly, the European petty bourgeoisie. What historian David Blackbourn calls the “perennially awkward class in recent German history,” has long been problematic for social theorists due to its ambiguous economic position.⁵⁰⁵ The traditional *Mittelstand* had their own means of production (tools, shops, etc.) but still performed manual labor, putting them in a peculiar position with regard to traditional understandings of capitalist class divisions.⁵⁰⁶

⁵⁰³ Jürgen Habermas, the most prominent member of the second generation of the Frankfurt School, has made a much more vigorous distinction between two kinds of reason, which he calls “communicative rationality” and “instrumental reason.” See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vols. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984). Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality is a direct response to Horkheimer and Adorno. See especially Jürgen Habermas, “The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Teodor Adorno,” in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990).

⁵⁰⁴ Kracauer, *Mass Ornament*, 122. ; *Das Ornament*, 98.

⁵⁰⁵ Blackbourn, “Mittelstand,” 432. Some of the earliest sociological attempts to deal with this class include: Werner Sombart “Was verstehen wir unter dem Mittelstand?” (Göttingen, 1897); Johann Wrnicke, *Kapitalismus und Mittelstandspolitik* (Jena, 1907); Emil Dederer and Jakob Marschak, “Der neue Mittelstand,” *Grundriss der Sozialökonomie* 9, pt. 1 (1926); and Theodor Geiger, *Die soziale Schichtung des deutschen Volkes* (Stuttgart, 1931). Cited in Arno J. Mayer, “The Lower Middle Class as Historical Problem,” *Journal of Modern History* 47, no. 3 (1975): 420.

⁵⁰⁶ Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, “The Petty Bourgeoisie in Germany and France in the Late Nineteenth Century,” in *Bourgeois Society in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Jürgen Kocka and Allan Mitchell (Oxford ; Providence: Berg, 1993), 302.

In “The Communist Manifesto,” Marx and Engels write that “the lower strata of the middle class” are destined to “sink gradually into the proletariat.”⁵⁰⁷ Yet despite their inevitable proletarianization, the petty bourgeoisie form the heart of political reaction and are almost always harmful to the cause of socialism. Accordingly, the label “petty bourgeois” has come to function as a general term of abuse within the socialist movement.⁵⁰⁸ What Marx said in 1850 of the French peasantry following the election of Louis Bonaparte, has become a typical descriptor of the petty bourgeoisie: “they do not form a class. They are consequently incapable of enforcing their class interest [. . .] They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.”⁵⁰⁹

The *Mittelstand* has not fared much better in general histories where they have typically been portrayed as a prime example of Germany’s political backwardness.⁵¹⁰ They rejected liberalism, and in some accounts even “modernity.”⁵¹¹ Conservatives considered them to be a source of easily manipulated political support, acting as a “buffer” between the upper and lower classes that was immune to the appeals of the socialist agenda.⁵¹² For a long time, historians have largely concurred with this view.⁵¹³

⁵⁰⁷ Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 479-80.

⁵⁰⁸ For typical despairing remarks on the petty-bourgeoisie’s role in political revolution and the dangers of “petty bourgeois socialism” see Marx’s 1879 circular letter to leaders of the SPD *Ibid.*, 553., Also see the 1850 “Address to the Communist League” Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 504. And finally, Friedrich Engels, *Germany: Revolution and Counter-Revolution* (New York,: International publishers, 1933). (Especially the section on “petty traders.”)

⁵⁰⁹ “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” in Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 608.

⁵¹⁰ Mayer, “The Lower Middle Class as Historical Problem,” 415-16.

⁵¹¹ See Shulamit Volkov, *The Rise of Popular Antimodernism in Germany : The Urban Master Artisans, 1873-1896* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978).

⁵¹² Blackbourn writes: “its complex amalgam of submissiveness and volatility rendered the *Mittelstand* incapable of becoming a reliable ally of the political Right.” Blackbourn, “Mittelstand,” 412. Although it was not unusual for the SPD to receive some votes from the *Mittelstand*, the socialist party normally did not seek support from non-industrial workers, 432.

⁵¹³ Winkler’s is the classic account of the *Mittelstand* as an essentially “backwards and pre-industrial” element in a re-feudalized Kaiserreich. Heinrich August Winkler, *Mittelstand, Demokratie Und Nationalsozialismus. Die Polit. Entwickl. V. Handwerk U. Kleinhandel in D. Weimarer Republik* ([Köln]: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1972). Blackbourn gives extensive references for this tendency in the

In the traditional historiography the *Mittelstand* saga culminates in 1932/33 when the old *Mittelstand* is joined by the new to give the Nazis the electoral support necessary for the *Machtergreifung* (seizure of power).⁵¹⁴ In this telling, radical nationalism offers a solution to the ‘political homelessness’ from which the *Mittelstand* had long suffered. The interwar economic and social dislocation experienced by the *Mittelstand*, old and new, left them ripe for the political picking. Dismissed by the Left as reactionary and “long taken for granted” by the traditional conservative parties, the onset of economic Depression made them ready to support drastic change.⁵¹⁵ As the Weimar Republic began to crumble, many contemporary commentators noted that the economically vulnerable *Mittelstand* were successfully courted by the rising Nazi party.⁵¹⁶ Writing in *Die Arbeit* in 1930, Theodor Geiger put it bluntly: “No one needs doubt that we can thank the old

historiography, Blackbourn, "Mittelstand." Beginning in the 1970s this view of the *Mittelstand*, along with the *Sonderweg* thesis of which it is a part, has been revised. See especially Blackbourn, "Mittelstand."

⁵¹⁴ That the story ends here reveals a flaw in the *Mittelstand* thesis – why does this group, so crucial to the Nazi rise to power, all but disappear from the BRD political arena? On this point see Friedrich Lenger, "Mittelstand Und Nationalsozialismus? Zur Politischen Orientierung Von Handwerkern Und Angestellten in Der Endphase Der Weimarer Republik," *Archiv fuer Sozialgeschichte* 29 (1989): 198.

⁵¹⁵ Blackbourn, "Mittelstand," 433. As Childers points out the Nazis were appealing for what they were *not*: “unlike the DVP and DNVP, the Nazis were not associated with either big business or big agriculture, and unlike the DDP and Zentrum, they were not tainted by collaboration with the Social Democrats.” Thomas Childers, *The Nazi Voter : The Social Foundations of Fascism in Germany, 1919-1933* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 268.

⁵¹⁶ In their appeal to the Middle classes, the Nazis used rhetoric similar to that of traditional conservatives, promising to protect the *Mittelstand* way of life. The 1920 party program demanded the creation of a “gesunden [healthy] Mittelstandes.” See point 16 of the 25 point program: <http://www.dhm.de/lemo/html/dokumente/nsdap25/>

and new *Mittelstand* for the electoral victory of the National Socialists.”⁵¹⁷ This “*Mittelstand* Thesis” dominated the literature for the next several decades.⁵¹⁸

Historians have begun to revise this picture.⁵¹⁹ While the *Mittelstand* was slightly overrepresented among Nazi voters, their support alone did not ensure the party’s success. In his meticulously researched book, *The Nazi Voter*, Thomas Childers concludes that while, “In periods of economic crisis this hard core of Nazi electoral support was augmented by protest voters from the new middle class [. . .] the depression simply did not produce the oft-asserted concentration of support for the NSDAP within the social heterogeneous *Angestelltenschaft* [employee society].”⁵²⁰ In his 1991 monograph, Jürgen Falter reaches a similar conclusion.⁵²¹

⁵¹⁷ “Niemand zweifelt daran, dass der Nationalsozialismus seinen Wahlerfolg wesentlich dem Alten und Neuen Mittelstand verdankt.” Cited in Lenger, “Mittelstand Und Nationalsozialismus? Zur Politischen Orientierung Von Handwerkern Und Angestellten in Der Endphase Der Weimarer Republik,” 177. Lenger discusses several contemporary and secondary sources that support the “*Mittelstand* thesis.” See also Robert Gellately, *The Politics of Economic Despair : Shopkeepers and German Politics, 1890-1914* (London ; Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1974), 206-07. See Theodor Geiger, “Panik Im Mittelstand,” *Die Arbeit* (1930).

⁵¹⁸ Childers sums it up nicely: “Regardless of theoretical organization or methodological approach, virtually every analysis of Nazi support produced between 1830 and 1980 concluded that the social bases of the NSDAP were to be located almost exclusively in elements of the German *Kleinbürgertum* or petty bourgeoisie.” Thomas Childers, “The Middle Classes and National Socialism ” in *The German Bourgeoisie : Essays on the Social History of the German Middle Class from the Late Eighteenth to the Early Twentieth Century*, ed. David Blackbourn and Richard J. Evans (London ; New York: Routledge, 1991), 318. For the most significant early analysis, see Geiger, *Die Soziale Schichtung Des Deutschen Volkes*, Jeremy Noakes, *The Nazi Party in Lower Saxony, 1921-1933*, Oxford Historical Monographs. (London.: Oxford University Press, 1971)., Geoffrey Pridham, *Hitler's Rise to Power; the Nazi Movement in Bavaria, 1923-1933* (London.: Hart-Davis MacGibbon, 1973)., Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man; the Social Bases of Politics*, [1st ed. (Garden City, N.Y.,: Doubleday, 1960). Winkler, *Mittelstand*.

⁵¹⁹ In addition to the sources referenced directly in this section, see Rudy Koshar, *Splintered Classes : Politics and the Lower Middle Classes in Interwar Europe* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1990)., Thomas Childers, *The Formation of the Nazi Constituency, 1919-1933* (London: Croom Helm, 1986). And finally, Michael H. Kater, *The Nazi Party : A Social Profile of Members and Leaders, 1919-1945* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

⁵²⁰ Childers, *The Nazi Voter*, 263-64. Historian Peter Fritzsche agrees with Childers’s assessment that the Nazis enjoyed a broad base of support. However Fritzsche argues that “German voters acted more coherently and more ideologically” than Childers allows. Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 212-13.

⁵²¹ Jürgen W. Falter, *Hitlers Wähler* (München: Beck, 1991).

Yet in spite of this recently complicated historiography, commentators have continued to present this group as a threat to both democracy and economic liberalism. To give one example - the back matter of the 1998 English translation of Kracauer's *Die Angestellten* reads: "these white-collar workers [. . .] were to flee into the arms of Adolf Hitler." The question remains then, why has the *Mittelstand* thesis been, and continue to be, so powerful? Historian Richard Hamilton speculates that commentators have been "moved by a ready paradigm," one with an impressive pedigree: "The petty-bourgeoisie, as Marx and Engels put it, 'are reactionary for they try and roll back the wheel of history.'"⁵²² The image of the petty bourgeoisie (literally 'little' people) as defiantly ignorant and unwilling participants in the grand and often threatening project of modernity is an imminently appealing one. However such a useful paradigm alone cannot explain the persistence of the *Mittelstand* thesis. As I argue, the petty-bourgeoisie, and *die Angestellten* particularly, are, by virtue of their unique position in the worlds of capital and culture, especially suitable subjects for critiques of rationalization and bureaucracy.

As Kracauer explains in "Revolt," this group is at the center of the social and political upheavals wrought by pervasive rationalization. Their lives are the most shaped by rationalization, but they are the least able to mitigate its power through thought or action. Not only do *die Angestellten* lack the political will and power to unite and advocate together, they (mistakenly) identify their own interests with those of their employers, thus becoming active participants in their own oppression.

⁵²² Richard F. Hamilton, "The Rise of the Nazis," review of *Hitler's Wahler*, by Jurgen W. Falter, *Contemporary Sociology* 22, no. 4 (1993): 543. See also Richard F. Hamilton, *Who Voted for Hitler?* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982).

The *Mittelstand*'s employees and bureaucrats – ‘little men’ in the office and ‘cogs’ in the machinery of industry and states – characterize the second discourse. This discourse in turn, relies on the more theoretical critique of the impersonal bureaucratic rationalization that rules both state and enterprise, as laid out in the first discourse. Writing from within academia, Weber and Simmel described how rationalization, as embodied by bureaucracy and the money economy, demands consistency and conformity, while discouraging idiosyncrasy. In *Die Angestellten*, Kracauer argues that white-collar employees meet these demands in both body and soul, believing that the right appearance, training certificate, and subordinate attitude can secure their position in a shaky economy. They cannot face the reality of their powerlessness and recognize that they serve not as individuals, but functions. Just as their perspective on the workings of the firm is blinkered, so is their understanding of the larger economic structure of which they are a part.

The second discourse shows how the impersonality demanded by rationalization becomes dehumanization – a state most visible among *die Angestellten*, who compound it by remaining willfully blind to the nature of their position. In his review of *Die Angestellten*, Benjamin writes that Kracauer is a Marxist in so far as he recognizes “the primary task of Marxism,” which Benjamin holds to be: “the production of a proper consciousness.”⁵²³ Kracauer has irrefutably demonstrated:

⁵²³ An “unaffiliated and experimental leftist,” Kracauer was never aligned with any specific socialist movement or ideology. Jay, *Permanent Exiles*, 161. Nevertheless, he drew important contents from Marx, if not from orthodox Marxism. In a 1926 letter to Ernst Bloch, he pointed out Marx’s often unacknowledged heritage “from the French Enlightenment” and argued: “This means that decisive categories of Marxism such as the concept of the ‘human being’ or even ‘morality’ can be understood only if one builds a tunnel under the massive mountain of Hegel from Marx to Helvetius.” Cited in Frisby, *Fragments* 126. In other words, Marx’s origins extended beyond Hegel’s idealism, back to the enlightenment champions of Reason and the universal individual. The concerns are evident in both *Die Angestellten* and *The Mass Ornament*. Kracauer’s letters to Bloch during the Weimar years are the best

There is no class today whose thinking and feeling is more alienated from the concrete reality of its everyday existence than the salariat [*die Angestellten*]. And what this [false consciousness] means, in other words, is that accommodation to the degrading and inhumane side of the present order has progressed further among salaried employees than wage workers [*Lohnarbeiter*].⁵²⁴

As the most reliable servants of rationalization, *die Angestellten* have lost the ability to reason and to think, in other words, to be fully human. In “Revolt,” Kracauer writes: “Having been emptied of all substance, these classes are now no longer subject to anything other than the blinding neutrality of contentless thought.”⁵²⁵ In the post-Holocaust social theory examined in the next chapter, discussions of economic and political rationalization combine with analyses of the individual produced by a culture of instrumental rationality and mass distraction that closes off consideration of ultimate ends. The first and second discourses converge to describe how “the blinding neutrality of contentless thought” erases the proudest product of the Enlightenment – the thinking individual.

source for determining Kracauer’s feelings about Marx and Marxism at this time. See Inka Mülder-Bach, ed., *Briefwechsel Ernst Bloch-Siegfried Kracauer 1921-1966*, in Ernst Bloch, *Ernst Bloch Briefe: 1903-1975*, ed. Karola Bloch et. al., 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985).

⁵²⁴ Benjamin, “An Outsider Attracts Attention” in Kracauer, *Salaried*, 110. ; “*Politisierung*,” in *Angestellten*, 117. Ernst Bloch had a similar take in his own review of *Die Angestellten*, writing: “Their [the employees’] tedious work makes them more dull than rebellious, authorization papers nurture a caste-consciousness which has no real class consciousness behind it all.” “Artificial Centre” in Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 24. For a critique of Bloch’s “Laudatory but reductive” review, see Dagmar Barnouw, *Critical Realism : History, Photography, and the Work of Siegfried Kracauer* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 101-02.

⁵²⁵ Kracauer, *Mass Ornament*, 113. ; *Das Ornament*, 88.

Chapter Four

Explaining Eichmann: Post-Holocaust Critiques of Rationalization

I. The Dialectic of Enlightenment

From the “Iron Cage” to Eichmann

This dissertation’s final chapter looks at three different attempts to explain the Holocaust’s relationship to rationalized modernity. These three distinct approaches – of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, and recent historians – rely on earlier critiques of rationalization made in both the first and second discourses. Though there can be no definitive answer to the question of rationalization’s role in genocide, the debates discussed in this chapter are the culmination of a powerful tradition of critique by German social theorists and their critics.

As argued in Chapter One, the first discourse is typified by the approach of Max Weber, who deals with large structures by examining rationalization at the state, institutional, and broad societal levels. The first discourse treats rationalization as part of larger historical developments such as urbanization, the division of labor, and technological advancement. Weber’s contemporary, Georg Simmel, discussed in Chapter Two, examined the radical social changes that resulted from the specialization of labor and urbanization. At the same time Simmel focused on the individual’s response to rationalization (often through consumption), thus providing a bridge to the second discourse, which describes everyday experiences. A generation later, the journalist Siegfried Kracauer’s reportage on the world of *die Angestellten* (white-collar workers) deepened the investigation of rationalization’s effects on daily life, in this case – in the

offices and entertainment halls of Weimar Berlin. As argued in Chapter Three, Kracauer's study was part of a larger trend that saw *die Angestellten* as the face of economic rationalization and as the primary consumers of new mass cultural goods. His critique of the political ineptitude of *die Angestellten* was also part of a longer tradition chronicling the failure of the petty-bourgeoisie to understand and act according to their true economic position. According to many of their contemporaries and historians, the political decisions of *die Angestellten* were largely responsible for bringing the Nazis to power.

In the years following the collapse of the Weimar Republic, Marxist intellectuals had to confront the failure of the left to present a unified front against the Nazis. Most of these theorists, having fled political and racial persecution in Germany, made their assessments from abroad. Horkheimer and Adorno waited the war out in the United States before returning to Germany; Arendt came to the U.S. and stayed, becoming a citizen in 1951.⁵²⁶ The Polish-born Zygmunt Bauman fled to Soviet territory during the war and fought with the Soviet controlled Polish National Army; in 1968, after anti-Semitism stalled his career, he moved to England, where he still lives today. All four thinkers wrestled with the events of the Holocaust, and the challenge that "rationalized" genocide posed for the meaning of modernity, enlightenment, and humanity.

After the Second World War, the first and second discourses converged and continued the critique of rationalization as scholars sought to explain why National Socialism had taken hold in Germany and how ordinary men and women had become culpable in genocide. In these discussions, means-ends rationality is understood to have been a vital tool of so-called "desk murderers" and their collaborators as they committed

⁵²⁶ Horkheimer, Adorno, Arendt and Bauman were all of Jewish descent.

murder on an industrial scale. In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that a civilization built on the enlightenment principle of 'Reason' was to blame for the triumph of fascism and the failure of the West to achieve an equitable society. Along with their colleagues in the Frankfurt school, Horkheimer and Adorno practiced a neo-Marxist "Critical Theory" which drew on both the first discourse critique of rationalization and the second discourse's phenomenological analysis of the individual's experience of modernity. *Dialectic*, written in 1944, while the chaos of World War Two was still unfolding, has been an enormously influential text, though its conclusions are widely considered to have been overly extreme.

In the early 1960s the international community confronted the still raw legacy of the Holocaust in sensational fashion when the SS officer Adolf Eichmann was captured by Israeli police and put on trial for mass murder in Jerusalem. Owing largely to Arendt's presentation of him in her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Eichmann became an iconic (if highly contested) figure for our understanding of the Holocaust and its perpetrators. In Arendt's portrait, the man in charge of sending tens of thousands of Jews to their death appears not as a monster, but as a "banal" bureaucrat. Accounts of the Holocaust, such as Arendt's, that emphasize the normality of administrative means, professional practices, and modern technology raise the question: do all modern societies, including those built on rational enlightenment principles, contain the potential for genocide? Ultimately, the historical personage of Adolf Eichmann became a discursive "Eichmann" figure, essentially a kind of shorthand for the deepest problems of an overly rationalized society.

The Eichmann figure continues to haunt historiographical debates about the Holocaust, but no more so than those surrounding the publication, in 1989, of Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's book, *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Bauman argues that the Holocaust, rather than a deviation from civilization, was the product of a society driven by means-end rationality. Bauman's argument has come under heavy criticism by historians, but his central point – that genocide is not an aberration but an inherent possibility of modernity – has arguably been born out by recent history. This chapter's concluding section examines Bauman's argument and its critics, asking how the responses of historians and social theorists to the interpretative challenges posed by the Holocaust have roots in earlier critiques of rationalization. The icon of Eichmann has currency in large part because it emerges from analyses of rationalization already developed in the first and second discourses. The iconic Eichmann is a variant of Weber's "specialist without spirit," Simmel's modern individual who quantifies instead of qualifying, Kracauer's preening but powerless *Angestellter*, and an example of what Horkheimer and Adorno identified as the negative outcome of enlightenment – the use of knowledge as a tool for economic and political domination in place of critical reflection.

"Critical Theory" is the name the scholars of The Institute of Social Research (later known as the "Frankfurt School") gave to their work. The Institute was founded in Frankfurt in 1923 by the Marxist scholar Felix Weil who, along with his father, was also its chief financial backer. The generous funding of the Weil family meant the Institute enjoyed a high degree of autonomy, although it was loosely affiliated with the University of Frankfurt, and later Columbia University in New York. Max Horkheimer assumed the directorship in 1931 and was responsible for bringing the Institute's most famous thinkers

into its orbit including Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Walter Benjamin. Following the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 the Institute relocated to Geneva before moving to New York in 1935. In 1941 it moved again to southern California where Horkheimer and Adorno begin work on the “philosophical fragments” that would be published in 1944 as *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Although the members of the Institute were Marxist in orientation, when Horkheimer assumed the directorship he pointed the Institute in an academic, rather than activist direction. The reasons for this stance were many, but a significant one was the rise of fascism in Europe, which constituted a devastating defeat for the organized Left.⁵²⁷ *Dialectic* is a deeply pessimistic assessment of the current state and possible future chances of socialist revolution, and of western civilization generally. Horkheimer and Adorno argued that all reason had become instrumental rationality: efficient in the determination of means but incapable of reflecting on the value of ends. This is Weber’s description of modern rationalization, but with no chance of charismatic political leadership or innovate entrepreneurship left to challenge universal bureaucratization. Even the proletariat – in traditional Marxist theory the engine of social revolution was, as Horkheimer wrote in an earlier essay, now inclined to see the world “superficially” and “quite different than it really is.”⁵²⁸

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, European fascism was not a deviation from modern, western civilization, but its darkest variation. They made their argument by

⁵²⁷ Callinicos, *Social Theory*, 247. For a general history of the Frankfurt School, see Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination : A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). See also Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School : Its History, Theories, and Political Significance* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994).

⁵²⁸ Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory " in *Critical Theory; Selected Essays* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 214.

demonstrating how knowledge, the celebrated product of the enlightenment, had increasingly taken the form of instrumental, or means-ends, rationality and become a tool of coercion. For Horkheimer and Adorno the term “enlightenment” does not refer to a discrete historical movement of the eighteenth century, but a project spanning centuries of Western development. (*Dialectic* begins with an analysis of the ancient Greek text, *The Odyssey*). This program of knowledge building was promoted as a value-free search for ‘objective’ truth; in reality it aimed to bring the natural and human worlds under total control to better serve “the dominant means of production.”⁵²⁹

By rewriting the story of enlightenment, *Dialectic* functioned as an all-out attack on the West’s cherished notions of its own achievements.⁵³⁰ In the traditional telling, the process of enlightenment began when a group of European thinkers articulated a program of intellectual progress based on secular and scientific principles that would ‘enlighten’ society by sweeping away old beliefs entrenched in religious superstition and uncritical tradition. The enlightenment promoted the power of the human intellect to understand and shape the world. Each individual (or at least any European male) could access this power through the exercise of his Reason. The ability of humans to understand and shape their environment appeared limitless, no corner of the world need be left unilluminated. The story of progress – the West’s slow climb out of a dark world where life was, in Hobbes’s words “nasty, brutish, and short,” began with the enlightenment. What had once seemed mysterious, random, and uncontrollable, could now, with the power of language, definition and categorization, become knowledge [*Das Wissen*]. The

⁵²⁹ Max Horkheimer, “Reason and Self-Preservation” (1942), cited in Jay, *Dialectical Imagination*, 258.

⁵³⁰ “*Dialectic der Aufklärung* was an attempt by Adorno and Horkheimer to fulfill precisely the cognitive task which Benjamin had identified in 1940 as the most pressing, that is, to dismantle the myth of history as progress.” Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics : Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 60.

production and application of knowledge was the great achievement of the enlightenment. In *Dialectic*, Horkheimer and Adorno argued that knowledge was no longer a means of liberation, but had become a tool of oppression. Thought had become labor, and like physical labor it was un-free, controlled and driven by the demands of capitalist production. These conditions had allowed fascism to triumph in Europe and they continued to pervade Western civilization generally.

Although it was relatively autonomous due to the Institute's position and its scholars' unorthodoxy, Critical Theory was practiced almost exclusively in an academic environment. Its publications used specialized language and were written at a high level with an intended audience of other university-trained intellectuals. Like Weber its practitioners embedded a critique of existing society in their examination of economic and political history. Unlike Weber, the group was Marxist, though it did not endorse a specific political program or adhere to party dogma.⁵³¹ For all of these reasons, the work of Critical Theory belongs in the first discourse. At the same time however, *Dialectic* draws from and advances the second discourse.

Horkheimer and Adorno saw the political and economic situation as inseparable from the cultural one. Like Simmel, they exposed the interplay between objective and subjective cultural forms. In their accounting however, the balance between the two forces was not just uneven, but fatal to the development of a whole personality capable of critical reflection and conscious political action. *Dialectic's* analysis of the overwhelming power of objective culture was arguably its most innovative and influential section.

Horkheimer and Adorno's description of "The Culture Industry" universalized

⁵³¹ "One of the essential characteristics of Critical Theory from its inception has been a refusal to consider Marxism a closed body of received truths." Jay, *Dialectical Imagination*, 254.

Kracauer's analysis of Weimar cultural output and its role in buttressing the prevailing political-economic order. Their critique of politics radicalized earlier conclusions about the political manipulability of *die Angestellten* by applying them to the population at large.

Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of rationalization emerged from both discourses but in its broad-ranging ambition it was unique. The domination they described was not just a by-product of capitalist production, but part of "the specific, historical form of domination characteristic of the bourgeois era of Western history."⁵³² This enlightenment driven domination was in turn traceable back to the "larger conflict between man and nature both without and *within*."⁵³³ Humans had estranged themselves from nature by controlling it to meet the needs of industrial production. The same instrumental reason behind the triumphs of science and technology was now objectifying people themselves, who become interchangeable functions in the "administered world [*verwalteten Welt*]."⁵³⁴

The focus on "conflicts within" built on themes already explored by Kracauer and Simmel while also recasting the *Geist* versus *Naturwissenschaften* debates of Weber's day. Critical theorists did not ask which subjects and methodologies belonged to which science, but sought to counter the logic of enlightenment where rationalization ruled science as much as industry. Rationalized science rejected out of hand any questions related to slippery and incalculable *geistliche* concepts such as "meaning." In its place, the Frankfurt School promoted "Critical Theory" – an analysis of culture characterized by

⁵³² Ibid., 256.

⁵³³ Ibid. My emphasis.

⁵³⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic* xi. ; Hereafter, *Dialectic*. ; Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialektik* ix. Hereafter *Dialektik*.

relentless self-criticism, a method by which they intended to avoid the fate of other scientists who, consciously or not, ended up defending bourgeois society by representing its conditions as natural.

The Critique of Enlightenment

Horkheimer and Adorno begin *Dialectic* with the contention that enlightenment has resulted in a world “radiant with triumphant calamity.”⁵³⁵ Their critique builds on and radicalizes Weber’s disenchantment thesis, wherein he argued that as more of the world is understood scientifically, questions of ultimate meaning are pushed into the realm of the irrational. In a 1946 speech Horkheimer echoes Weber, explaining: “Religion is concerned with man’s goals and destiny, science with truth alone. It is the division between the search for knowledge, on the one hand, and the evaluation of norms, on the other, which threatens to destroy all meaning.”⁵³⁶ Science has not just broadened its domain, but it has become more specialized, offering more facts but less comprehensive explanations. ‘Knowledge’ is no longer included the evaluation of norms – the meaning of these facts for society and individual lives; it only asks how things work, not what they *mean*.⁵³⁷

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the program of enlightenment seeks first to “disenchant” and then to master the world. Knowledge is now the search for *methods*. Rather than pursued for philosophical reflection, it is produced exclusively for practical

⁵³⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic* 1. ; *Dialektik* 9.

⁵³⁶ Max Horkheimer, “Reason Against Itself: Some Remarks on Enlightenment” in *What is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth Century Answers and Twentieth Century Questions*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).

⁵³⁷ “On their way toward modern science human beings have discarded meaning. The concept is replaced by the formula, the cause by rules and probability,” Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic* 3. ; Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialektik*, 10.

application.⁵³⁸ Where once the application of Reason meant not just the gathering of facts but the ability to reflect on the ethicality of their use, it has devolved into means-end, or instrumental, rationality.

In the opening pages of *Dialectic*, Horkheimer and Adorno explain:

Knowledge, which is power, knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in deference to worldly masters. Just as it serves all the purposes of the bourgeois economy both in factories and on the battlefield, it is at the disposal of entrepreneurs regardless of their origins.⁵³⁹

Employers of knowledge as means do not use it to question their ends. From the factory to the battlefield, knowledge maintains and protects the capitalist market, when necessary, with violence. Knowledge is a technique employable by whoever is able to wield it, regardless of their cultural or economic background: “Kings control technology no more directly than do merchants.” Weber called bureaucracy a “precision tool” and Horkheimer and Adorno describe knowledge in a similar way. Technology is equally effective whether a king or merchant uses it; it does not privilege habit or tradition. As a value-neutral tool, knowledge provides a *how*, but not a *why*. By eliminating “the last remnant of its own self-awareness,” enlightenment transforms human’s relationship to the natural world. Ultimately, the domination of nature becomes the domination of people as “what human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings.”⁵⁴⁰

⁵³⁸ Under the conditions of Enlightenment, everything becomes “measured by the standard of utility.” James Schmidt, “Introduction,” in *What Is Enlightenment? : Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 23.

⁵³⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic 2. ; Dialektik* 10.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid. ; Ibid.

This domination works by turning people into things. Rationalization – for Horkheimer and Adorno a product not of industrialization, but enlightenment itself – treats human beings no differently than any other raw material.

Being is apprehended in terms of manipulation and administration. Everything—including the individual human being, not to mention the animal—becomes a repeatable, replaceable process, a mere example of the conceptual models of the system.⁵⁴¹

The individual human being is brought into a system that replaces qualification with quantification in an effort to make the world “calculable.”⁵⁴² To be counted things and people must be stripped of their individual qualities – a process of abstraction.⁵⁴³ In the bourgeois economy both producers and consumers are no longer individual agents, but “repeatable, replaceable processes” – functions in a system. These developments result in alienation for “the more heavily the process of self-preservation is based on the bourgeois division of labor, the more it enforces the self-alienation of individuals, who must mold themselves to the technical apparatus body and soul.”⁵⁴⁴

This assessment reveals the debt Horkheimer and Adorno had to the Hungarian Marxist critic György Lukács and his theory of reification, as laid out in the 1923 book *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács, a student of both Weber and Simmel, was able to integrate their analysis of objectification and rationalization “into the Marxist critique of the capitalist mode of production.”⁵⁴⁵ As Lukács explains, rationalization is the

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., 65. ; Ibid., 91.

⁵⁴² Ibid., 4. ; Ibid., 13.

⁵⁴³ “Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence.” This equivalence “makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities.” Ibid. ; Ibid.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid., 23. ; Ibid., 36.

⁵⁴⁵ Callinicos, *Social Theory*, 205.

principle that underlies reification – literally “thingification” (*Verdinglichung*).⁵⁴⁶

Reification first appears in bureaucratic institutions when relations between functions replace relations between persons but soon comes to characterize “every social relationship under capitalism.”⁵⁴⁷

Lukács’s theory of reification built on Marx’s analysis of “the fetishism of commodities.”⁵⁴⁸ This phrase refers to the process whereby producers and consumers confront commodities as autonomous objects whose origins as products of human labor are obscured. In turn wage-laborers workers come to view their own labor-power (measured in time) as an object outside of themselves. Hence reification is related to the alienation of labor.⁵⁴⁹ Failure to recognize the true conditions of production thus hinders any attempt to change those conditions as “a relation between people takes on the character of a thing,” which conceals its “fundamental nature: the relation between people.”⁵⁵⁰

The instrumental rationality behind reification creates a bureaucratic culture, which Lukács argues “implies the adjustment of one’s way of life, mode of work and hence of consciousness to the general socioeconomic premises of the capitalist economy.”⁵⁵¹ Lukács believed the proletariat still had the potential to recognize the true, exploitative nature of production and incite revolution; for Horkheimer and Adorno, this possibility has disappeared. Thus *Dialectic* constitutes a more radical and pessimistic critique, one that calls into question the West’s most precious myth about itself – its own

⁵⁴⁶ György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness; Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), 88.

⁵⁴⁷ Callinicos, *Social Theory*, 205.

⁵⁴⁸ Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 319.

⁵⁴⁹ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness; Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, 87.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

inevitable progress – and replaces it with a potentially fatal diagnosis: the state of thinking is in acute decline. Horkheimer and Adorno describe a closed system where genuine reflection, and thus meaningful resistance, is impossible.

In confirming the scientific system as the embodiment of truth—the result arrived at by Kant—thought sets the seal on its own insignificance, because science is a technical operation, as far removed from reflection on its own objectives as is any other form of labor and the pressure of the system.⁵⁵²

When it became synonymous with truth, science removed itself from the context of its own production – its history.⁵⁵³ By making it serve the needs of technology exclusively, enlightenment has completely divorced science from philosophy – that is reflection.⁵⁵⁴ Science cannot critique a system with which it is complicit. Enlightenment, the original myth-destroyer has itself become as rigid and unquestionable as any ancient myth.⁵⁵⁵

Existence, thoroughly cleansed of demons and their conceptual descendants, takes on, in its gleaming naturalness, the numinous character which former ages attributed to demons. Justified in the guise of brutal facts as something eternally immune to intervention, the social injustice from which those facts arise is a sacrosanct today as the medicine man once was under the protection of his gods.⁵⁵⁶

⁵⁵² Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic* 66. ; *Dialektik.*, 92.

⁵⁵³ See Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory".

⁵⁵⁴ "Thinking, where it is not merely a highly specialized piece of professional equipment in this or that branch of the division of labor, is suspect as an old-fashioned luxury: 'armchair thinking.' It is supposed to 'produce' something." Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic* 167. ; *Dialektik*, 211.

⁵⁵⁵ Jay, 260. See also Buck-Morss, *Origin* 59.

⁵⁵⁶ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic* 21. ; *Dialektik* 34.

In this passage, Horkheimer and Adorno are describing the same process that Weber, a generation earlier, called “Disenchantment” or “De-magicification.”⁵⁵⁷ Science has made the entire world explainable, eliminating the need for mythical explanations, or “demons and their conceptual descendents.” Horkheimer and Adorno then go a step further, arguing that “existence,” now “thoroughly cleansed” of magic has itself taken on the divine aura of an eternal and unquestionable myth. The social injustice that underlies those facts is “sacrosanct” and immune to intervention. The prevailing “social injustice” is further inculcated against protest by another part of the system – the “culture industry.”

The Culture Industry

The “bourgeois economy” has created an entire industry tasked with preventing critical reflection. In the chapter “Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” Horkheimer and Adorno introduce the idea of the culture industry, which works in tandem with the economic and political imperatives of capitalist production. Rationalization so pervades the entertainment world “that the off-duty worker can experience nothing but after-images of the work process itself.” Art is no longer for pleasure or to stimulate reflection – it is a tool to recuperate from the working day – in order to work again tomorrow.⁵⁵⁸

As in science, the purpose of art has been reduced to that of a function. By denying its consumers escape from “the principle of utility” that rules their working lives, the role of art is subverted. “What might be called use value in the reception of cultural assets is being replaced by exchange value.”⁵⁵⁹ The personal experience of viewing a particular film or dancing to a popular song is irrelevant. It matters not why one does

⁵⁵⁷ The German term is *Entzauberung*.

⁵⁵⁸ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic* 109. ; *Dialektik* 145.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 128. ; *Ibid.*, 167

something, only that she does: “enjoyment is giving way to being there and being in the know.” The “commodity character of art” renders the evaluation of works based on merit irrelevant.⁵⁶⁰ In *The Philosophy of Money*, Simmel showed how the money economy is a relentless leveler – pulp novels and Hamlet are qualified by their price (exchange value) not their contents (use value). This leveling is a result of rationalization, which, as employed by the culture industry creates standardized products and standardized consumers, which are both equal parts of the same system.⁵⁶¹

Defenders of the culture industry claim that standardization is a legitimate response to the demands of millions of consumers. Horkheimer and Adorno argue however that “In reality, a cycle of manipulation and retroactive need is unifying the system ever more tightly.”⁵⁶² The culture industry creates the appetite for its own offerings by cultivating consumers worn down by their role as replaceable components in the system of production. However it is not simply that the market provides entertainment for consumption, this entertainment plays a role in keeping the population compliant. Where Simmel, and to a lesser degree, Kracauer, believed consumers still exercised a degree of choice, for Horkheimer and Adorno, all agency is disappearing. The masses may experience success, sex, and glamour vicariously, but must not actively agitate for their own economic and political freedom or personal pleasure.⁵⁶³

Horkheimer and Adorno write that amusement “is indeed escape, but not, as it claims, escape from bad reality but from the last thought of resisting that reality. The

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid. ; Ibid.

⁵⁶¹ “Culture today is infecting everything with sameness. Film, radio, and magazines form a system.” Ibid., 94. ; Ibid., 128.

⁵⁶² Ibid., 95. ; Ibid., 129.

⁵⁶³ “Pleasure becomes an object of manipulation, until it finally perishes in the administrative arrangement. This development extends from the primitive feast to the holiday” Ibid., 83. ; Ibid., 113.

liberation which amusement promises is from thinking as negation.”⁵⁶⁴ Thinking as negation could lead to change (negation) of the existing conditions of production. Kracauer also pointed to a link between work and leisure and demonstrated how they resemble each other both in experience and in effect. While he saw the function of mass culture as primarily keeping *die Angestellten* “more firmly in their appointed place,” Kracauer acknowledged that new forms of entertainment, such as the rationalized dancing of the Tiller Girls dance troop, offer the chance for genuine reflection because they mirror the working audience’s own daily experience more closely than any classical art form could.⁵⁶⁵ For Horkheimer and Adorno however, any such potential no longer exists. The culture industry administers art like any other consumer product and culture becomes just another calculable good, rather than an opportunity for critical thinking. The formulaic products of the culture industry mean the spectator “needs no thoughts of his own: the product prescribes each reaction.”⁵⁶⁶

Like Kracauer, Horkheimer and Adorno identify the lower middle class – “the workers and salaried employees, the farmers and petty bourgeois” as the primary targets of the culture industry.⁵⁶⁷ (They also, like Kracauer, imply women are particularly susceptible to the deceptions of mass culture).⁵⁶⁸

[Film stars] are ideal types of the new, dependent Middle Classes [*abhängigen Mittelstands*]. The female starlet is supposed to symbolize the secretary [*Angestellte*], though in a way that makes her seem predestined, unlike the real secretary, to wear the flowing evening gown. Thus she apprises the female

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid., 116. ; Ibid., 153.

⁵⁶⁵ See “The Mass Ornament” in Kracauer, *Mass Ornament*.

⁵⁶⁶ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic* 109. ; *Dialektik* 145.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid., 106. “Arbeiter und Angestellten, die Farmer und Kleinbürger.” Ibid., 142.

⁵⁶⁸ For another example see, Ibid., 123. ; Ibid., 142.

spectator not only of the possibility that she, too, might appear on the screen but still more insistently of the distance between them. Only one can draw the winning lot.⁵⁶⁹

The culture industry is not just about creating and selling products, but controlling beliefs about what is possible. Here, Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of popular film echoes Kracauer's in several key respects. Films invite spectators to imagine themselves as the glamorous starlet – but that sense of escape only lasts as long as the theater lights are dimmed. Audience members are like diners who “must be satisfied with reading the menu.”⁵⁷⁰ The secretary on screen may rise up above her station but her lucky break reminds the audience that their own rescue is out of the question. Identification only goes so far, individuals are saved, but there is no hope for the collective and members of the audience do not identify with one another.

Collective action is based on the cooperation of individuals, but under advanced capitalism “The individual is entirely nullified.”⁵⁷¹ In place of individual agency, the culture industry offers “the peculiarity of the self,” where individuality is reduced to the moustache, the French accent, the deep voice of the prostitute, the “Lubitsch touch.”⁵⁷² The power of capitalist objective culture precludes the ability of subjective culture to develop, much less fight back, as Simmel suggested might be possible. Horkheimer and Adorno warn:

Through the mediation of the total society [*der totalen*], which encompasses all relationships and impulses, human beings are being turned back into precisely

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid., 116. ; Ibid., 153.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid., 111. ; Ibid., 148.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., xvii. ; Ibid., 4.

⁵⁷² Ibid., 125. ; Ibid., 163.

what the developmental law of society [*Regungen erfassenden Gesellschaft*], the principle of the self [*Prinzip des Selbst*], had opposed: mere examples of the species, identical to one another through isolation within the compulsively controlled collectivity.⁵⁷³

The Bourgeois economy – “the developmental law of society” was originally where the individual (the self) reigned supreme, free to pursue its interests in the economic and social marketplace. Now, as all have become “mere examples of the species,” such self-assertion is impossible. The path to success and self-empowerment loops back on itself in a closed system.

The possibility of becoming an economic subject, and entrepreneur, a proprietor, is entirely liquidated. Right down to the small grocery, the independent firm on the running and inheriting of which the bourgeois family and the position of its head were founded has fallen into hopeless dependence. *All have become employees [Angestellten], and in the civilization of employees [Angestelltenzivilisation], the dignity of the father, dubious in any case, ceases to be.*⁵⁷⁴

The industrial production model and its partner in domination, the Culture Industry, have usurped traditional modes of economic independence –“the dignity of the father.” First the manual laborer, then the office worker, and now all are rendered powerless in the “*Angestelltenzivilisation.*” By demanding everyone “identify wholeheartedly with the

⁵⁷³ Ibid., 29. ; Ibid., 43.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid., 123. My emphasis. ; Ibid., 162.

power that beats them,” the culture industry achieves “the miracle of integration” which “signifies fascism.”⁵⁷⁵

For Horkheimer and Adorno, fascism is but the most extreme manifestation of the general direction of “enlightened” civilization.

Enlightenment expels difference from theory. It considers “human actions and desires exactly as if I were dealing with lines, planes, and bodies.” The totalitarian order has put this into effect in utter seriousness. Freed from supervision by one’s own class, which had obliged the nineteenth-century businessman to maintain Kantian respect and reciprocal love, fascism, which by its iron discipline relieves its peoples of the burden of moral feelings, no longer needs to observe any discipline. Contrary to the categorical imperative, and all the more deeply in accord with pure reason, it treats human beings as things [. . .] the totalitarian order has granted unlimited rights to calculating thought and puts its trust in science as such. Its cannon is its own brutal efficiency.⁵⁷⁶

“The totalitarian order,” which is here implied to be the ruling force of any state in the modern West, cannot tolerate difference or dissent of any kind. Following the logic of the capitalist market, all superfluous or limiting constraints, such as “moral feelings,” have been eliminated. Fascism functions according to “pure reason,” unlimited “calculating thought” and unquestioned “science,” and “treats human beings as things” to better “its own brutal efficiency.”

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., 124. ; Ibid., 163.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid., 67. ; Ibid., 93. The quoted text is Spinoza.

After its initial publication in 1944, Horkheimer and Adorno added a concluding section to *Dialectic* on “Elements of Anti-Semitism,” where they attributed the prevalence of anti-Semitism partly to the modern facility for “stereotyped thinking” – the only kind of thinking left.⁵⁷⁷

The individual no longer has to decide what he or she is supposed to do in a given situation in a painful inner dialogue between conscience, self-preservation, and drives. For the human being as wage earner [*Erwerbstätigen*] the decision is taken by a hierarchy extending from trade associations to the national administration; in the private sphere it is taken by the schema of mass culture, which appropriates even the most intimate impulses of its forced consumers. The committees and stars function as ego and superego, and the masses, stripped of even the semblance of personality, are molded far more compliantly by the catchwords and models than ever the instincts were by the internal censor.⁵⁷⁸

Thinking individuals have given way to standardized automatons whose inner worlds are no longer immune from the system of domination. The activities of the producers, consumer, and even the experiencing self – down to “the most intimate impulses” are now un-free. Between the hierarchy of work and state (“trade associates and national administration”) by day and Hollywood stars in the evening – every feeling and impulse is supplied as rationalization down to the smallest detail erases any vestige of self-management. In this passage, Horkheimer and Adorno foreshadow the tone of Arendt’s portrait of Eichmann. As in this description of an everyman employee, Arendt’s Eichmann also lacks an internal censor – he is a cipher, “full of catchwords and models.”

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid., 166. ; Ibid., 210.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid., 168. ; Ibid., 213.

II. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

Eichmann in Court

Chroniclers of the Holocaust often describe it as a rationalized mass murder perpetrated by the means of an impersonal and self-propelling bureaucracy, which released its functionaries, “desk-murderers,” or “cogs in a machine,” from the moral ramifications of their actions. Much of this imagery can be traced back to Hannah Arendt’s account of the 1961 trial of the S.S. officer Adolf Eichmann, published in book form in 1963 as *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. After the war, Eichmann escaped from allied custody and fled to Argentina with his family. He was living there under an assumed name when Israeli operatives captured him in May of 1960 and brought him to Israel to stand trial. The following spring the State of Israel charged Eichmann on fifteen counts, including “war crimes,” “crimes against humanity,” and “crimes against the Jews.” Eichmann was convicted on all counts and, after losing his appeal, was executed on May 31, 1963.

According to Arendt, Eichmann, and so many others like him, were “neither perverted nor sadistic” but “terribly and terrifyingly normal.”⁵⁷⁹ From the time she filed her first report for the *New Yorker* in 1961, until the present day, Arendt’s presentation of Eichmann as a ‘banal’ bureaucrat has been hugely controversial, but hugely influential as well. Several points of Arendt’s analysis of the man Eichmann and the circumstances of his crimes have been key themes in later histories. In particular, she stressed the

⁵⁷⁹ Arendt, *Eichmann*, 276.

importance of euphemistic language surrounding the execution of genocide, the unemotional and objective nature of bureaucracy, and the ways in which totalitarian political systems function to eliminate independent thought.⁵⁸⁰

Arendt's analysis relied heavily on the pioneering work of the historian Raul Hilberg who detailed the role of bureaucracy in Nazi Germany's "machinery of destruction" in his 1961 book *The Destruction of European Jews*.⁵⁸¹ Eichmann was integral to this machinery. A member of the SS *Sicherheitsdienst* (Security Service), in 1934 Eichmann began working in the Jewish affairs office of Berlin. After the *Anschluss* in 1938, Eichmann was transferred to Vienna where he directed the transportation of Jews to concentration camps. Following the 1942 Wannsee Conference implementing the so-called Final Solution, Eichmann became responsible for assembling and sending Europe's Jews to their deaths in the East – a charge he executed with efficiency and effectiveness.

For the last fifty years, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* has been thoughtfully critiqued and willfully mischaracterized, but always vital. Arendt's Eichmann has proved to have life well beyond the pages of her book as the iconic soulless bureaucrat, and the phrase "the banality of evil" has become the go-to shorthand for the problems of an intensely rationalized modern world. Arendt's portrayal of Eichmann (and its afterlife) draws from both the first and second discourses. Horkheimer and Adorno might have chosen him as the perfect exemplar of a man who is at once firmly in control of his instrumental reason

⁵⁸⁰ The following passage is typical of Arendt's analysis: "This 'objective' attitude—talking about concentration camps in terms of 'administration' and about exterminating camps in terms of 'economy'—was typical of the S.S. mentality, and something Eichmann, at the trial, was still very proud of. By its 'objectivity' (*Sachlichkeit*), the S.S. disassociated itself from such 'emotional' types as Streicher," Arendt, *Eichmann*, 69.

⁵⁸¹ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Student ed. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985).

while completely unable to exercise Reason (*Vernunft*) – or critical reflection. Arendt’s Eichmann embodies their dictum: “To be free of the stab of conscience is as essential to formalistic reason as to be free of love or hate.”⁵⁸² Or, as Weber put it: “*sine ira studio*” – without hatred or love.⁵⁸³ In Eichmann’s unwavering adherence to organizational authority and institutional norms, he functioned as a Weberian ideal-typical bureaucrat. Simmel described how the modern division of labor divorces workers from the overall context of the production process, reducing them to mere fractions of a whole – or cogs in a machine. During his testimony, Eichmann repeatedly emphasized that he was but a subordinate part of the system of destruction – that it had not been his place, or in his power, to plan or judge. Perhaps most surprising however is the ways in which Arendt’s Eichmann is reminiscent of Kracauer’s *Angestellter* – an unimaginative man with a petite-bourgeois mentality who is eager to please his superiors and tenaciously clings to the prestige provided by his position.

Eichmann’s defense was built around the argument that he was a not a murderous anti-Semite, but rather a loyal servant of his state and his position – a good employee in other words. In his testimony Eichmann emphasizes repeatedly that he had no decision making powers, no ill will towards the Jews personally, and was only “following orders” – and reluctantly at that. He redirects all discussion about killing into technical matters, describing himself as an “instrument,” and “transmitting agency.”⁵⁸⁴ At one point, Eichmann’s refusal to assume any responsibility whatsoever so enrages the prosecuting attorney that Hausner yells “What are you, an *Obersturmbannführer* or a shorthand-

⁵⁸² Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic 75*. ; *Dialektik*, 102.

⁵⁸³ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 225. ; *Wirtschaft*, 129.

⁵⁸⁴ Transcribed from the documentary film, “The Specialist.” Eyal Sivan, “The Specialist,” (New York: Kino International, 1999).

typist?”⁵⁸⁵ Yet Eichmann could never be goaded into admitting that he had exercised his own initiative.

From her opening description of Eichmann to her conclusion that he ultimately “never realized what he was doing,” Arendt’s own analysis overlaps in problematic ways with the presentation of the defense. Her Eichmann is weak and lacks initiative; he is scarcely capable of having an original thought and appears less a monster than a clown, possessed of an “undeniable ludicrousness.”⁵⁸⁶ She describes the 55-year-old defendant in unflattering terms: “medium-sized, slender, middle-aged, with receding hair, ill-fitting teeth, and nearsighted eyes, who throughout the trial keeps craning his scraggy neck toward the bench.”⁵⁸⁷ Arendt’s condescending description of Eichmann at times borders on infantilism. Her Eichmann has only a child’s sense of right and wrong. He can follow the rules, but not judge for himself. According to Arendt, Eichmann presents his innocence if not convincingly, than genuinely, – that is he really seems to believe that he could not have done otherwise – indeed *should not* have done otherwise.

Arendt’s description of Eichmann resonates with the empty-headed employees of *Die Angestellten* and *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Although she points out that Eichmann was born of a “solid middle-class family,” she reports: “In court, Eichmann gave the impression of a typical member of the lower middle classes, and this impression was more than borne out by every sentence he spoke or wrote while in prison.”⁵⁸⁸ His own lawyer held the same dismissive opinion, declaring “his client’s personality was that

⁵⁸⁵ Transcribed from *Ibid.* It is interesting to note that Hausner addresses Eichmann directly in German. After Hausner calms down, he goes back to speaking Hebrew.

⁵⁸⁶ Arendt, *Eichmann*, 54.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

of ‘a common mailman.’”⁵⁸⁹ For Arendt, Eichmann’s extreme deference to authority was evidence that he was motivated, not by “fanaticism” but by the opportunity to participate in the “Good Society” by serving his social superiors.⁵⁹⁰ The Nazi party allowed Eichmann, who as a young man had been a failure professionally, to make good, and his time in the party constituted “the twelve years that were his life.”⁵⁹¹ Of these the best was the year spent overseeing the forced emigration of Viennese Jews, when “Eichmann, for the first time in his life, discovered in himself some special qualities.”⁵⁹² Arendt’s analysis on this point resonates with Weber’s description of how bureaucracy ensures the slavish devotion of its functionaries by providing professional status in exchange for the bureaucrat’s free will. Weber writes:

A strong status sentiment among officials not only is compatible with *the official’s readiness to subordinate himself to his superior without any will of his own*, but – as in the case with the officer—*status sentiments are the compensatory consequence of such subordination*, serving to maintain the official’s self-respect.⁵⁹³

Bureaucracies operate efficiently and reliably by marshalling the high level of commitment among functionaries who have sacrificed their own agency for the “compensatory consequence” of the status they receive from their position.

Eichmann’s entire defense was built around his role as an ideal bureaucrat – “without any will of his own” – and it was a part he played exceedingly well. When one

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid., 145.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid., 149, 26.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., 43.

⁵⁹² Arendt claims this characteristic of Eichmann’s accounts for “the politeness he often showed to German-speaking Jewish functionaries” who he recognized as “socially his superiors.” Ibid., 126.

⁵⁹³ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 958. My emphasis.

of the judges grew tired of Eichmann's evasive answers, the defendant excused himself by saying "Officialese [*Amtssprache*] is my only language."⁵⁹⁴ Arendt's commentary on this point is key to understanding her analysis of Eichmann; she writes: "the point here is that officialise became his language *because he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché.*"⁵⁹⁵ For Arendt, Eichmann's reliance on clichés was not a product of bureaucratic conditioning so much as a symptom of a much larger defect – "an inability to *think.*"⁵⁹⁶ She continues: "To be sure, the judges were right when they finally told the accused that all he had said was "empty talk" – except that they thought the emptiness was feigned, and that the accused wished to cover up other thoughts which, though hideous, were not empty."⁵⁹⁷ In Arendt's view, this emptiness was very real. The functioning of Nazi German society relied on what she calls a "language system" built on clichés and lies, in short, on language robbed of its critical capacities. Arendt argues that during the twelve years of Nazi rule virtually all Germans, whether active or passive supporters of the regime, adopted these language rules.⁵⁹⁸ But Eichmann did no just adapt, he excelled, given his "great susceptibility to catch words and stock phrases, [which] combined with his incapacity for ordinary speech, made him, of course, an ideal subject for "'language rules.'"⁵⁹⁹ Even after the state that enforced these rule had long

⁵⁹⁴ Arendt, *Eichmann*, 48. My emphasis.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.* My emphasis.

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹⁸ "German society of eighty million people had been shielded against reality and factuality by exactly the same means, the same self-deception, lies, and stupidity that had now become ingrained in Eichmann's mentality." *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

been defeated, Eichmann still adhered to them.⁶⁰⁰ He thought in clichés until the very end. Arendt reports that as Eichmann went to the gallows:

He was completely in command of himself, nay, he was more: he was completely himself. Nothing could have demonstrated this more convincingly than the grotesque silliness of his last words. [. . .] “After a short while, gentlemen, *we shall all meet again*. Such is the fate of all men. Long live Germany, long live Argentina, long live Austria. *I shall not forget them*.” In the face of death, he had found the cliché used in funeral oratory.⁶⁰¹

According to Arendt, Eichmann acted not out of conviction, but pathological conformity. He was attracted to the Nazi party not for its ideology, but for the chance to be a part of “a Movement.”⁶⁰² He could not recognize his own guilt because “he always thought within the narrow limits of whatever laws and decrees were valid at a given moment.”⁶⁰³ In Nazi Germany, criminal acts were legal and for Eichmann, “a law was a law, there could be no exceptions.”⁶⁰⁴

Arendt’s portrait of Eichmann is completely at odds with the one presented by the prosecution which, lead by Attorney General Gideon Hausner, painted Eichmann as the mastermind behind the entire Final Solution, grossly over-inflating his role and influence in the Third Reich.⁶⁰⁵ Hausner called dozens of survivors to the stand; most had never

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid., 53. The judges “were outraged as well as disconcerted when they learned that the accused had at his disposal a different elating cliché for each period of his life and each of his activities.”

⁶⁰¹ Ibid., 252.

⁶⁰² When asked to explain the appeal of the Nazi Movement, Eichmann could only repeat the – what else? – “same embarrassed clichés about the Treaty of Versailles and unemployment.” Ibid., 33.

⁶⁰³ Ibid., 157.

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid., 137.

⁶⁰⁵ Lipstadt’s analysis of the difference is pithy: “Both Hausner and Arendt had extrajudicial agenda for the trial. He acknowledged his (educating Israeli youth and delivering a Zionist message). She failed to acknowledge hers (warning about totalitarian regimes) and brutally castigated Hausner for his.” Deborah E. Lipstadt, *The Eichmann Trial* (New York: Nextbook/Schocken), 181.

heard of Eichmann. Their testimony (as the judges recognized) was largely irrelevant to the legal case against Eichmann. Hausner however, with the backing of Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, wanted to use the trial as a public accounting for the crimes of the Nazis against Jews. Hausner believed the survivors had a moral right to be heard, and their testimony was undoubtedly among the most riveting and memorable parts of the trial.⁶⁰⁶ Yet the case against Eichmann was strong enough on its own merits that these measures were unnecessary. In Arendt's eyes, Hausner's tactics reeked of political manipulation and undermined the integrity of the trial by trying Eichmann, not for what he had done, but for "what the Jews had suffered."⁶⁰⁷ The point of a criminal trial after all, is to determine guilt or innocence of the accused in reference to specific deeds. What it owes history is a truthful account, no more, no less.⁶⁰⁸ One of Arendt's primary concerns was of the legal veracity of the trial. The international community was very much split about Israel's right to try Eichmann (to say nothing of the manner in which he was captured and brought to Jerusalem). Arendt convincingly defended Israel's right to bring Eichmann to trial and many of her criticisms of the prosecution were valid.

While she had harsh criticism for the prosecution, Arendt had high praise for the three presiding judges, who continuously (if not effectively) directed Hausner to restrict himself to discussing Eichmann's deeds. She lauded their final judgment, which recognized the unique nature of the crimes of the Holocaust, namely that "*the degree of*

⁶⁰⁶ Arendt, *Eichmann*, 51-55.

⁶⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 608.

⁶⁰⁸ "If the defendant is taken as a symbol and the trial as a pretext to bring up matters which are apparently more interesting than the guilt or innocence of one person, then consistency demands that we bow to the assertion made by Eichmann and his lawyer: that he was brought to book because a scapegoat was needed." *Ibid.*, 286.

*responsibility increases as we draw further away from the man who uses the fatal instrument his is own hands.*⁶⁰⁹ Arendt summarized the judgment:

Eichmann, it will be remembered, had steadfastly insisted that he was guilty only of “aiding and abetting” in the commission of the crimes with which he was charged, that he himself had never committed an overt act. The judgment, to one’s great relief, in a way recognized that the prosecution had not succeeded in proving him wrong on this point. For it was an important point; *it touched upon the very essence of this crime, which was no ordinary crime, and the very nature of this criminal, who was no common criminal.*⁶¹⁰

Though the prosecution had been unable to prove that Eichmann himself had ever physically killed a Jewish person (and they tried mightily), the judges ruled that by “aiding and abetting” Eichmann was guilty of mass murder. Eichmann maintained his innocence until the end, insisting that his superiors were to blame for issuing immoral orders and that he was blameless for following them. He denied ever having had any personal ill will towards the Jews. Amazingly, Arendt takes Eichmann at his word on this point and explains why the judges could not. “Because they were too good, and perhaps also too conscious of the very foundations of their profession,” they failed to intuit what Arendt saw as the real “lesson” of Eichmann: “that an average, ‘normal’ person, neither feeble-minded nor indoctrinated nor cynical, could be perfectly incapable of telling right from wrong.”⁶¹¹ The law is founded on the belief that an individual of able mind and body can distinguish right from wrong. Eichmann, the unthinking but relentlessly obedient bureaucrat, spewing clichés for his final words: “was summing up the lesson

⁶⁰⁹ Judgment as quoted by Arendt, with her italics. *Ibid.*, 246-47.

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 246. My emphasis.

⁶¹¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

that this long course in human wickedness had taught us—the lesson of the fearsome, world-and thought defying *banality of evil*.”⁶¹²

The Banality of Evil

While far and away the most cited aspect of her argument, “the banality of evil” remains an elusive concept in *Eichmann*, and it appears in the original text only once. Despite its relatively weak conceptualization the “banality of evil” has an explanatory appeal that has extended far beyond its first appearance. (In this respect, it mirrors the reception of Weber’s “Iron Cage” phrasing). Perhaps the biggest reason for its academic and popular success is that the “banality of evil” gets at one of the most disturbing aspects of the Holocaust – that it happened in a society not much different than our own and that the perpetrators included so many ordinary men and women. Arendt’s thesis went to the heart of this problem – she believed Eichmann represented a “new type of criminal.”⁶¹³ It was his novelty that was especially threatening, for it lay in his normality – his banality.

Rather than a “monster,” Eichmann was one of many who “commits his crimes under circumstances that make it will-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong.”⁶¹⁴ Arendt does not deny that Eichmann *did* wrong – only that he could “know or feel” that he was doing wrong.⁶¹⁵ These circumstances do not excuse Eichmann, and Arendt ends her book with a rhetorical address to its subject, denying his

⁶¹² Ibid., 252.

⁶¹³ Ibid., 276.

⁶¹⁴ Ibid.

⁶¹⁵ Arendt does not back off from these conclusions in her post-script, writing: “Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his own personal advancement, he had no motives at all. [. . .] He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*.” Ibid., 287. Emphasis in the original.

right to claim innocence because he was just “following orders”: “For politics is not like the nursery; in politics obedience and support are the same.”⁶¹⁶

Nevertheless, it is easy to see how these kinds of statements got Arendt into trouble. Obedience implies the power to choose to obey, a power which Arendt rightly does not deny Eichmann. Yet she does not satisfactorily explain her certainty that it was “well nigh impossible” for him to understand his actions. While she successfully argues that Eichmann and his collaborators cannot be dismissed as sadistic monsters, Arendt’s insistence on his banality blinds her to the possibility that he was committed to Nazi ideology, and that his protestations to the contrary betray nothing so much as a commitment to saving his own life.

Moreover, Arendt never fully accounts for Eichmann’s total “thoughtlessness.” Did the Nazi “machinery of destruction” force its functionaries to turn off their judgment – was this the key to its technical triumphs and its moral failures? Or did the Nazis purposely select empty-headed *Angestellter* types that would best serve the regime? Arendt seems to suggest the latter: “It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of the period.”⁶¹⁷ Although she ends the post-script with the statement: “The present report deals with nothing but the extent to which the court in Jerusalem succeeded in fulfilling the demands of justice,” her own passionate plea that we heed the “lesson” of the trial suggests she recognized there was much more at stake than one man’s guilt or innocence.⁶¹⁸

⁶¹⁶ Ibid., 279.

⁶¹⁷ Ibid., 287-88.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid., 298.

Arendt's detractors justifiably faulted her for de-emphasizing Eichmann's personal initiative and essentially accepting the defense's argument that, rather than an initiator of genocide, he was merely an obedient bureaucrat. Indeed, there are serious problems with her book: her analysis of Eichmann's motivations is almost comically one-dimensional; her account was not always historically accurate; her damning critique of the Jewish leadership in Europe was cruel at worst, tone-deaf at best. From today's perspective, we can also see that she failed to grasp the full significance of the trial, and especially witness testimony, for not only the young state of Israel, but for Jews, especially survivors, and the understanding of the Holocaust around the world.⁶¹⁹ At the same time Arendt's one-sidedness and passionate intensity are why *Eichmann* continues to be a riveting and challenging read.⁶²⁰ She was right in citing the novelty of the crime's rational-bureaucratic execution (if not the crime itself, as she points out, genocide was not a new practice). If she failed to see the full significance of Eichmann's trial, she was prescient in citing the Nazis as committing "*crimes against humanity*, perpetrated on the body of the Jewish people."⁶²¹ Here she was predictive about the place the Holocaust would hold in debates on the causes and prevention of genocide and the unique challenge such crimes present in that "an altogether different order is broken and an altogether different community is violated."⁶²² Arendt recognized that the Holocaust is at once a particular story about Germans and Jews and a universal story where "the entire human race sits invisibly beside the defendant in the dock."⁶²³

⁶¹⁹ Deborah E. Lipstadt, *The Eichmann Trial* (New York: Nextbook/Schocken, 2011), xi.

⁶²⁰ This section has been influenced by Deborah Lipstadt's well-balanced account of Arendt and the trial in Chapter Six (pages 148-187) of her book *The Eichmann Trial*.

⁶²¹ Arendt, *Eichmann*, 269.

⁶²² *Ibid.*, 272.

⁶²³ *Ibid.*, 286.

Eichmann and Dialectic

With its unrelentingly negative diagnosis of the current state of Western civilization, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* constitutes a much more damning critique of modernity and enlightenment than any potential reading of *Eichmann*. Arendt herself did not implicate the enlightenment legacy in *Eichmann* or elsewhere; on the contrary she remained committed to liberal, democratic, and humanistic, enlightenment principles. Yet she did see a stark danger in the dehumanizing effects of means-ends rationalization and how its dominance could result in the rule of “Nobody.”⁶²⁴ Such a rule denies any deliberations based on reflective judgment, favoring instead instrumental reason. Arendt argues, “When Hitler said that a day would come in Germany when it would be considered a ‘disgrace’ to be a jurist, he was speaking with utter consistency of his dream of a perfect bureaucracy.”⁶²⁵ Bureaucracy perfected would mean the end of judging, the end of critical thinking.

Citing the fact that the mentally disabled and terminally ill were the first victims of the Nazis organized murder, Arendt warned “that in the automated economy of a not-too-distant future men may be tempted to exterminate all those whose intelligence quotient is below a certain level.”⁶²⁶ Yet as dark as these reflections are, Arendt also recognized that the Eichmann trial, whatever its flaws, was a triumph of a civilized, if imperfect order. For under the rule of just law “all the cogs in the machinery, no matter how insignificant, are in court forthwith transformed back into perpetrators, that is to say

⁶²⁴ Ibid., 289.

⁶²⁵ Ibid., 290.

⁶²⁶ Ibid., 288-89.

into human beings.”⁶²⁷ Those individuals acting as even the smallest parts of the “machinery of destruction” are still responsible for their obedience – they are perpetrators. They *could* have chosen otherwise because they are, after all, human.

While she rejected the “cog” defense, in the Postscript to *Eichmann*, Arendt grants:

It is important to the political and social sciences that the essence of totalitarian government, and *perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, and thus to dehumanize them.*⁶²⁸

As historians have long noted, the Nazis subjected their victims to intensely dehumanizing treatment as a way to prevent perpetrators and bystanders from experiencing empathy with them. However Arendt suggests that what Weber called bureaucratic rule also dehumanizes those running the “administrative massacre” by turning them into non-thinking cogs.⁶²⁹ On this point Arendt’s analysis resonates strongly with Horkheimer and Adorno, who also identified the state of the legal system as a measure of the health of the thinking man.

In late-industrial society there is a regression to judgment without judging. When, in fascism, the protracted legal process was replaced by an accelerated procedure in criminal trials, up-to-date people had been economically prepared for this development. They had learned to see things unreflectingly, through ready-made thought models, the *termini tecnici* which provide them with iron rations

⁶²⁷ Ibid., 289.

⁶²⁸ Ibid., 189. My emphasis.

⁶²⁹ The phrase “administrative massacres” appears on page 288.

following the decay of language. The perceiver is no longer present in the process of perception.⁶³⁰

When reflection – “process” – is replaced by “procedure,” citizens do not protest because they have been conditioned to consume whatever the system offers them. Those “up-to-date people” who follow the output of the culture industry most closely see everything, even justice, as just another ready-made product. By looking at the systematic nature of rationalization *and* its effects on the capacity for critical thinking at the individual level, Horkheimer and Adorno, along with Arendt, pick-up themes from both discourses. Arendt’s Eichmann thrived in a bureaucratic culture that could have been described by Weber, one that demanded nothing but obedience. Like Kracauer’s *Angestellter*, rather than recognize the true nature of his subordinate status, Eichmann emulated his superiors and protected his own precarious position in the hierarchy. Horkheimer and Adorno radicalize Weber’s analysis by describing a culture so thoroughly rationalized that even thought comes in “ready-made” models. They radicalize Simmel’s thesis that the money economy replaces qualification with quantification by arguing further that the capitalist economy has “economically prepared” the citizens of “late-industrial society” for “judgment without judging.”

⁶³⁰ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic* 167. ; *Dialektik* 211.

III: *Modernity and the Holocaust*

Modernity and the Holocaust

As first described by Hilberg and Arendt, the image of a “machinery of destruction” powered by modern bureaucracy has run through numerous subsequent histories of the Holocaust. George Mosse and Hans Mommsen are just two examples of prominent historians whose works employ these themes. In his book *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism*, Mosse argues: “The holocaust could not have taken place without the application of modern technology, without the modern centralized state with its card files and communication systems.”⁶³¹ Mosse also names “the new sciences of the Enlightenment” as one of the major sources of racism.⁶³² As both Hilberg and Arendt did, Mommsen points to the “orderly” nature of Nazi destruction as part of what made it possible.⁶³³ Mommsen too relies on the metaphor of “bureaucratic machinery” which he says functioned “more or less automatically,” and describes a destructive process that “developed an internal dynamic.”⁶³⁴ Mediated by decades of such scholarship, the “banality of evil” and the “dialectic of Enlightenment” discourses coalesced in Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s 1989 book *Modernity and the Holocaust*, and ignited these debates anew.

⁶³¹ George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution : A History of European Racism* (New York: H. Fertig, 1985), 233.

⁶³² *Ibid.*, xxix-xxx. The second major source was the “Pietistic revival of Christianity,” xxx.

⁶³³ Hans Mommsen, “The Realization of the Unthinkable: The ‘Final Solution of the Jewish Question’ in the Third Reich,” in *From Weimar to Auschwitz : Essays on German History* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1991), 249-50. Mommsen called Eichmann “a spectacular example of the mechanism of compartmentalized responsibility,” 252.

⁶³⁴ *Ibid.*, 250, 51.

In *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Bauman argues that the Holocaust demands a reexamination of the methods and prejudices of the social sciences -- methods which uncritically accept what Horkheimer and Adorno called the myth of enlightenment – that Western civilization is inherently good and getting better. Bauman rejects the understanding of the Holocaust as a single aberration of the post-enlightenment world. Instead he argues that it was the conditions of modernity and the enlightenment that made the Holocaust possible: “Without modern civilization and its most essential achievements, there would be no Holocaust.”⁶³⁵ These “essential achievements” include highly rationalized bureaucracy, centralized state power (and state monopoly on the means of violence), and modern technology and science. *Modernity’s* provocative argument has been enthusiastically received by many – but historians have been less receptive.⁶³⁶ Historians have been critical of Bauman’s monolithic conception of self-propelling rationalization, arguing that even within hierarchical bureaucratic structures, individual initiative and agency were essential to the program of genocide.

Debates about the Holocaust’s place in the story of modernity respond to specific and unique historical events but the terms and stakes of these arguments have roots in earlier critiques of rationalization. The phrase “machinery of destruction” has currency because we can now conceive of ‘organization’: time tables, files, specialized vocabulary, office hierarchy, and the division of intellectual labor, in short – *bureaucracy* -- as a machine. Bauman examines the dominance of rationalization – not just in factories, offices, and entertainment halls – but also at the highest possible level – as the plan of a totalitarian state to reengineer society. The Nazis employed the most advanced

⁶³⁵ Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 87.

⁶³⁶ *Modernity* won the European Amalfi prize, given biannually for achievement in sociology.

technological and administrative means available to work towards their radical and terrible ends. For Bauman, the destruction wrought by the Third Reich would have been impossible without the power of modern bureaucracy, which treats everything in its purview, including humans, as objects.

In the opening to *Modernity*, Bauman quotes Raul Hilberg on one of the most chilling aspects of the Holocaust:

The machinery of destruction, then, was structurally no different from organized German society as a whole. The machinery of destruction *was* the organized community in one of its special roles.⁶³⁷

Bauman's critique is built around this most distributing fact -- what Arendt called "administrative murder" was carried out by the same "organized" society which determines the daily existence of modern individuals.⁶³⁸ This was an order enforced by ordinary, not evil, men. Such an insight requires a difficult confrontation with the fundamental premises underlying modern society. Eichmann was a key member of the Nazi rule of order, and that is why he emerges as an iconic perpetrator and why the meaning of his status is so contentious. Depending on one's stance in these debates, the Holocaust either represent the flight from enlightenment-inspired Reason or the most intense and deadly case of an enlightenment-derived rationalization that characterizes modern life generally.

By presenting the second position, *Modernity and the Holocaust* joins a tradition of diagnosing the inherent ills of modern civilization that goes back to Nietzsche. In his conclusion Bauman references Weber and Nietzsche as he describes the anxiety produced

⁶³⁷ Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 9.

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

by the presence of powerfully destructive technologies combined with the “de-throning” of an all-powerful creator (and explainer), as one of the defining characteristic of the twentieth century:

Together with the new unheard-of potency of man-made technology came the impotence of self-limitations men imposed through the millennia upon their own mastery over nature and over each other: the notorious *disenchantment of the world* or, as Nietzsche put it, ‘*death of God.*’⁶³⁹

While Bauman is working in a tradition with such grand themes and metaphors *Modernity* also discusses many of the nuts and bolts of rationalization described in early critiques. His analysis paints the picture of a society-wide bureaucratic culture that promotes abstraction and increases the distance between means and ends, which are characteristics of rationalization identified by Simmel, whom Bauman cites specifically.⁶⁴⁰ Bauman relies on Weber’s theory of bureaucratic power and function, but in his attack on Western civilization’s most cherished principles he is more in line with the radical critique of Horkheimer and Adorno. Finally, he aligns himself with Arendt as a Cassandra warning us to heed the dark lesson of the Holocaust.⁶⁴¹

Making generous use of secondary sources (including Hilberg, Arendt, Mommsen, and Christopher Browning), Bauman builds his argument on historical scholarship that has corrected earlier characterizations of Nazi practice and ideology as highly anti-modern.⁶⁴² From this conclusion however, many historians have described the

⁶³⁹ Ibid., 218.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid. See pages 36, 53, and especially 228.

⁶⁴¹ Bauman considers Arendt one of the first, and the few, to see the implications of the Holocaust for modernity. He writes: “For many decades -- to this very day, one may say -- Arendt’s remained a voice in the wilderness,” Ibid., 211. Also see page 177.

⁶⁴² Some of this historiography has also included the contention that the Nazis were ‘anti-modern’ in ideology if not always in practice. More recent historiography suggests that the real issue is what the

Nazis as practicing a kind of “perversion” of modernity – the implication being that modernity proper could never lead to state-sponsored genocide. Bauman, while accepting the revision of the “anti-modern” Nazi argument, takes issue with the conclusion that the Nazi version of modernity was necessarily an “unnatural” one. He argues instead that the Holocaust is an inherent potential of modern civilization, writing:

*The Holocaust was born and executed in our modern rational society, at the high stage of our civilization and the peak of human cultural achievement, and for this reason it is a problem of that society, civilization and culture.*⁶⁴³

The failure of modern society to appreciate fully the implications of the Holocaust for itself is “a sign of dangerous and potentially suicidal blindness.”⁶⁴⁴ Bauman believes the cordoning off of the Holocaust from the “normal” chronology of the history of Western civilization, a move made by educators, theologians, the popular imagination, and many academics, represents a dishonest, defensive measure.⁶⁴⁵

Essential to Bauman’s argument is the point that the day-to-day functioning of Nazi bureaucracy was not essentially any different than “the sober description of modern administration offered by Max Weber” – only the goals were different. According to

particular Nazi version (or perversion) of modernity means for the general category of modernity and the enlightenment project specifically. For an example of the view that the Third Reich represented a “perversion” of modernity see Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Michael Thad Allen gives a useful summary and critique of the anti-modern thesis in “Modernity, the Holocaust, and Machines without History,” Gabrielle Hecht and Michael Thad Allen, eds. *Technologies of Power* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001). In his fascinating essay, “Nazi Modern,” Peter Fritzsche takes a different approach, arguing that the Nazis can be viewed as *modernists*, “Nazi Modern” (*Modernism/Modernity* 3.1, 1996: 1-22).

⁶⁴³ Bauman, x. Emphasis in the original.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁵ Bauman, 3, 9, 10. Bauman also sees the reluctance to acknowledge the darkest potential of modernity as the primary reason behind the wide-spread dismissal of the Milgram experiments, 154. In his important and influential book, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*., Christopher Browning used the Milgram experiment in his analysis (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993). Police Battalion 101 is also at the center of Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), where the author argues that Battalion 101’s actions are an example of an “eliminationist anti-Semitism” unique to Germany.

Bauman, the activity of Eichmann's office – the RHSA (Reich Security Main Office): “did not differ in any formal sense (the only sense that can be expressed in the language of bureaucracy) from all other organized activities designed, monitored and supervised by ‘ordinary’ administrative and economic sections.”⁶⁴⁶ Bureaucratic language is “formal” and so cannot articulate moral concerns or questions. Bauman's argument rests on this understanding of bureaucratic process, which he further describes as “*divesting the use and deployment of violence from moral calculus, and of emancipating the desiderata of rationality from ethical norms and moral inhibitions.*”⁶⁴⁷

Bureaucracy is built on the separation of moral reflection and deeds. The Holocaust represents a case where this separation “was pushed to the extreme and revealed its full potential.”⁶⁴⁸ According to Bauman, the Holocaust would be unthinkable without the conditioning of institutions and people by rationalization. Means-ends rationality allowed bureaucrats like Eichmann to do their job in a moral-free context by separating the doer from the “others” who were affected by his deeds.⁶⁴⁹ Bauman cites Weber again on the honor of the civil servant who executes the orders of his superiors “exactly as if the order agreed with his own conviction,” and summarizes “through honor, discipline is substituted for moral responsibility.”⁶⁵⁰

In short, physical extermination was “the matter of dull bureaucratic routine.”⁶⁵¹ While Bauman concedes that mass killing has occurred in history without the help of modern bureaucracy, he posits, “*the very idea of the Endlösung [Final Solution] was an*

⁶⁴⁶ Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 14.

⁶⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 28. Emphasis in the original.

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁶⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁶⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

outcome of the bureaucratic culture.”⁶⁵² “Bureaucratic culture” includes “means-ends calculus, budget balancing, universal rule application” and the search for “rational solutions to successive ‘problems,’” all of which demonstrate “the self-propelling capacity” of expertise “to expand and enrich the target which supplied its *raison d’etre*.”⁶⁵³ In Bauman’s description, bureaucracy becomes an animate object that sustains itself by “expanding and enriching” its target as human agency disappears:

Once set in motion, the machinery of murder developed its own impetus: the more it excelled in cleansing the territories it controlled of the Jews, the more actively it sought new lands where it could exercise its newly acquired skills.

Even after it was clear that Germany would lose the war, the murdering machine kept going, powered “solely [by] its own routine and impetus.” According to Bauman the perpetrators persisted not out of personal commitment to Nazi ideology, but from the desire to employ their murderous skill “simply because they were there.”⁶⁵⁴

However bureaucratic culture does not just produce the means of the Holocaust, Bauman suggests that the modern “engineering” approach to society accounts for the emergence of the scientific racism that determined the Nazis’ ends.⁶⁵⁵ Bauman characterizes western civilization as a “modern gardening state” that views “the society it rules as an object of designing, cultivating and weed-poisoning.”⁶⁵⁶ The “coolly rational bureaucratic process” of genocide emerged from this modern “garden culture,” where scientists act as taxonomists, cultivators, and destroyers – nourishing ‘healthy’ elements

⁶⁵² Bauman, 15. Emphasis in the original. For a critique of Bauman’s treatment of rationality and bureaucracy see Paul du Gay “Is Bauman’s bureau Weber’s bureau?: a comment” *British Journal of Sociology* Vol. 50 No 4 (December 1999) pp. 575-587.

⁶⁵³ Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 17.

⁶⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁶⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 73. Emphasis in the original.

⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

and eradicating dangerous ‘weeds.’ The demands of modern science meant that the “natural” difference of the Jew had to be identified and “managed.”⁶⁵⁷ In its racist variant, garden culture operates “*through cutting out the elements of the present reality that neither fit the visualized perfect reality, nor can be changed so that they do.*”⁶⁵⁸ This gardening imperative drives western civilization and its spirit was the genesis of scientific racism and the deadly ideology that it helped to grow.⁶⁵⁹ Bauman is ultimately making a broad argument about the nature of heavily rationalized modern society generally – a society characterized by pervasive abstraction and de-personalization, which ultimately combine to result in dehumanization.⁶⁶⁰ As Simmel did, Bauman makes a connection between the modern money economy, which requires the reduction of everything to “quantitative measures” and dehumanization, as people become objects to be counted and organized, indistinguishable from each other and from things.⁶⁶¹

In the “gardening state” all rationality is instrumental rationality, targeted towards “the rational pursuit of efficient, optimal goal-implementation.”⁶⁶² This position allows Bauman to make the extraordinary statement: “At no point of its long and tortuous execution did the Holocaust come in conflict with the principles of rationality.” Bauman qualifies his claim: “This is not to suggest that the incidence of the Holocaust was *determined* by modern bureaucracy or the culture of instrumental rationality it epitomizes.” Yet he maintains:

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid., 57.

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid., 65. Emphasis in the original.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid., 18.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid., 103.

⁶⁶¹ Ibid., 102-03.

⁶⁶² Ibid., 17.

The rules of instrumental rationality are singularly incapable of preventing such phenomena; that there is nothing in those rules which disqualifies the Holocaust-style methods of ‘social-engineering’ as improper or indeed, the actions they served as irrational.”⁶⁶³

The problem is the modern Enlightenment, or “garden culture” has elevated scientific language and instrumental rationalization to the exclusion of moral considerations, which are not quantifiable. Rationalization can only promote the most effective of means, it is incapable of judging ends.

Bauman powerfully demonstrates the role of bureaucracy and professional institutions in the Holocaust. The physical and psychic distance from the killings which bureaucracy afforded Eichmann and his colleagues, and the ‘cover’ of science that allowed medical professionals to participate in forced euthanasia and later genocide – are important for understanding the roles and motivations of the perpetrators. Yet Bauman’s emphasis on bureaucracy ignores the motivating role that ideology may have played for “desk murders,” such as Eichmann, as well as for those perpetrators who *did* commit face to face murder – for example the “ordinary men” of Christopher Browning’s study of the *Einsatzgruppen* who acted outside of the “industrial” model.⁶⁶⁴ While Bauman does not forget that it was *people* who set the “murdering machine” in motion, other kinds of motivation, such as ideology, personal advancement, and peer pressure, fall by the wayside in his analysis.⁶⁶⁵

⁶⁶³ Ibid., 18.

⁶⁶⁴ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men : Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1992), 1992.

⁶⁶⁵ Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 106.

We do not have to give rationality an unambiguously positive value to recognize that the Nazi genocide, whatever its dependence on bureaucracy and technology, was not a smoothly unfolding, “efficient” process. Bauman forgets that the Holocaust took place in the historically specific context of unprecedented war and was directed by a unique and ideologically driven dictatorship. For if his point is that the Holocaust could happen in any modern society, why was it that it only happened in one? In other words what were the conditions that allowed for the Holocaust to originate in modern Germany, and not in other modern societies?⁶⁶⁶ To a degree, the a-historicism of *Modernity* is intentional as Bauman endeavors to place the Holocaust in the story of modernity, past and present, in and outside of Germany. However his failure to ground the Holocaust in its historical context ultimately weakens his overall argument.

Situating the Holocaust in History

Historians challenge and compliment the picture offered by Bauman by placing the universal aspects of bureaucracy and rationalization he identified in the histories of Germany, Europe, racism, nationalism, and war. Historical accounts can both support and undermine Bauman’s theory about the relationship between the Holocaust and modernity. The historian Detlev J.K. Peukert’s influential essay “The Genesis of the Final Solution from the Spirit of Science” supports Bauman’s analysis by arguing that the Final Solution emerged from more mainstream cultural concerns.⁶⁶⁷ At the same time Peukert situates

⁶⁶⁶ Tzvetan Todorov makes the point well: “It happens, however, that the camps existed in the Soviet Union and Germany—that is, in two countries with totalitarian political structures—and not, in spite of everything, in the United States.” Tzvetan Todorov, “Measuring Evil,” *The New Republic* 202, no. 12 (1990).

⁶⁶⁷ Peukert, “Genesis.”

the Holocaust firmly in German history and is careful to qualify it as an outcome of modernization that relied on very specific historical circumstances.

Peukert's area of specialization is social welfare education, and he examines the relationship between the policies of the Weimar welfare state, which "nourished a 'Utopian' view of social policy," and the radical policies of the Third Reich.⁶⁶⁸ He begins by arguing that with the success in the early twentieth century of "combating epidemic disease" came the expectation for equal success in combating various "social" diseases.⁶⁶⁹ These expectations were embodied in the social welfare policies of the Weimar Republic. However the myriad problems of the Republic prevented it from advancing very far in its goal of perfecting the social body.⁶⁷⁰ While the Republic could not remedy its problems, the sciences found their own solution, specifically in what Peukert, resonating with Bauman's description of "gardening culture," calls "the racist paradigm of selection and eradication."⁶⁷¹ Though medical science could ultimately not perfect individual bodies (or prevent them from dying), the conceptualization of the "collective 'body' of the nation," the *Volkskörper*, solved this dilemma.⁶⁷² What followed was the emergence, in broad strata of public policy, of "a ruling paradigm and guide to action . . . whereby people were divided into those possessing 'value' and those lacking 'value.' 'Value' was to be selected and promoted, and 'non-value' was to be segregated

⁶⁶⁸ Editors note appearing in Peukert, page 274.

⁶⁶⁹ Peukert, 280.

⁶⁷⁰ The failure of social welfare to deliver on its promises contributed to a legitimization crisis of the Republic itself. Peukert develops this argument in his book, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, trans. Richard Deveson. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989).

⁶⁷¹ Peukert, 289.

⁶⁷² Peukert, 282.

and eradicated.”⁶⁷³ Nazi policy acted to “perfect” the *Volkskörper* and “protect” it from deviant “enemies” within.

Peukert emphasizes, as have other historians, that Nazi racial policies were bound-up “with the pattern – at first sight so normal – of German society; in other words with everyday life.”⁶⁷⁴ Though he does not argue that the human and social sciences he discusses are German specific, Peukert carefully historicizes their unique developments, and maintains “such an evolution was [not] absolutely inevitable.”⁶⁷⁵ Rather, “several critical junctures and strategic shifts were required” before the implementation of such a radical solution. Peukert elaborates:

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, the paradigm of selection and elimination, already dominant, is made absolute . . . racist terminology is elevated into the *lingua franca* of the human sciences and social welfare professions. And, as yet another change, one single branch of modern social thought, namely racism, is given supreme state backing.”⁶⁷⁶

The necessity of “supreme state backing” is a point Bauman also makes, as do many scholars of comparative genocide.⁶⁷⁷ However, both Bauman and Peukert do not want to dismiss the Third Reich as an absolute aberration. Thus while Peukert acknowledges that the radicalization of the language and actions surrounding the “value/non-value” paradigm was “owing to the particular character of historical change in Germany,” he maintains that all of these shifts “represented options implicit in the hybrid role of the

⁶⁷³ Peukert, 277.

⁶⁷⁴ Peukert, 276.

⁶⁷⁵ Peukert, 286.

⁶⁷⁶ Peukert, 289.

⁶⁷⁷ See Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth Century Europe*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001) Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred : Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001). See also Eric D. Weitz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003).

human and social sciences in the modern world.”⁶⁷⁸ As Bauman does, Peukert promotes a critical history of the Holocaust that reflects on the “past and present” and maintains that “the crimes of the Nazis” are but “one among other possible outcomes of the crisis of modern civilization.”⁶⁷⁹

Historians looking specifically at the Nazis’ daily operations have found, rather than a self-propelling bureaucratic process, that the persecution of the Holocaust relied on dedicated individuals. Michael Thad Allen is one of the historians who has taken on Bauman most directly, attacking an approach, which he traces back to Arendt, where “the connection between administrative function and human engagement has receded from view.”⁶⁸⁰ Allen argues that “emotional allusions to the ‘machinery of extermination’ and the ‘technocrats of death’” have caused historians to overlook the role innovation and ideology played for Eichmann and his counterparts. In contrast, Allen argues that Nazi bureaucrats functioned best when ideologically motivated.⁶⁸¹ In the Third Reich, ideological beliefs were institutionalized and ideology drove the perception and framing of administrative issues. For example, one Nazi official explained the high death rate of prisoners as a result of their “racial inferiority,” that is he understood it ideologically.⁶⁸²

In his 2002 book, *The Business of Genocide: The SS, Slave Labor, and the Concentration Camps*, Allen takes as his subjects engineers and mid-level managers of the WVHA. Allen argues that these men were not morally empty “desk murderers,” but

⁶⁷⁸ Peukert, 291.

⁶⁷⁹ Peukert, 295, 279.

⁶⁸⁰ Michael Thad Allen, “The Banality of Evil Reconsidered: Ss Mid-Level Managers and Extermination through Work,” *Central European History* 30, no. 2 (1997): 258.

⁶⁸¹ *Ibid.*: 259. Allen notes another important difference of Nazi management, in the case of the labor camps, mid-level managers were organized along military, rather than traditional managerial, lines (266, 269).

⁶⁸² “[Maurer] defined mortality rates as a medical problem *of the prisoners* instead of confronting the fact of the catastrophic mismanagement of supply, shelter or sanitation in IKL, not to mention violence,” Allen, “The Banality of Evil Reconsidered” 283. Emphasis in the original. See also 267.

ideologically driven supporters of the Third Reich and its genocidal policies. In his introduction, Allen explicitly challenges the image of the “numb and inane one-dimensional” Nazi bureaucrat.⁶⁸³ Allen argues that “the most hardworking individuals were those who knew and believed in what they did,” while the most ineffective acted out of “material ‘self-interest.’”⁶⁸⁴ Administrators’ commitment to ideology was important because it was uniting and “lent otherwise impersonal institutions an air of common identity and purpose, enabling corporation and trust among strangers.”⁶⁸⁵ Allen essentially reverses Bauman’s claim that, “The SS leaders counted (rightly, it would appear) on organizational routine, not on individual zeal; on discipline, not ideological dedication.”⁶⁸⁶

Allen’s intervention upsets some widely held understandings of the Nazi State. He aims to take down two different kinds of arguments about the Third Reich. One interpretation, which he associates with thinkers such as Arendt, Mommsen and Bauman, describes individual bureaucrats and engineers as “mere,” though lethal, cogs in a self-propelling machinery of murder. The second interpretation that Allen contends with characterizes the Third Reich administration, and the SS in particular, as full of infighting and power struggles. The first argument downplays personal motivation, the second sees narrow self-interest in the place of shared belief in a future-orientated, radical ideology. In the article “Bureaucracy and Mass Murder” (discussed below), historian Christopher Browning claims, “Few bureaucratic documents reveal the intellectual and moral odyssey

⁶⁸³ Michael Thad Allen, *The Business of Genocide : The Ss, Slave Labor, and the Concentration Camps* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 3.

⁶⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 277, 113.

⁶⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 283.

⁶⁸⁶ Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 120.

of their authors.”⁶⁸⁷ By contrast Allen uncovers examples of subjective ideology in official and informal perpetrator documents, as well as in the modern monuments – the factories and camps, which the Nazis built and imagined.

Business is a meticulous and exhaustive study of the WVHA’s activities and plans, everything from manufacturing of furniture to imagining the future of the re-Germanized East. Allen shows that Nazi ideology often trumped efficiency, or “rationality.” The use of slave labor occupied an important place in the Nazi economy, however production in the camps was not organized to best utilize large numbers of unskilled manual laborers.⁶⁸⁸ Allen successfully upsets the assumption of a “‘practical’ nature, or an austere value-free ‘rationality’ supposedly natural to engineers.”⁶⁸⁹ His research shows that many SS managers refused to recognize the horrible and fatal conditions of camp life as a problem for production. They made no attempt to improve the conditions and life span of Jewish prisoners; racism overcame “rational” productivity concerns.

Allen carefully corrects the characterization, made both popularly and by historians, that many Third Reich engineers operated independently of Nazi ideology and even in resistance to the SS. This picture of the morally neutral, rational engineer was created retroactively from post-war testimonies and reconstruction efforts.⁶⁹⁰ Allen’s contribution here is important; he identifies a potential danger in some of the conclusions of Bauman.

⁶⁸⁷ Christopher R. Browning, "Bureaucracy and Mass Murder: The German Administrator's Comprehension of the Final Solution," in *The Path to Genocide : Essays on Launching the Final Solution* (Cambridge ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 125.

⁶⁸⁸ Allen, *The Business of Genocide : The Ss, Slave Labor, and the Concentration Camps*, 89.

⁶⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁶⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 272.

[Bauman] asks us to believe that it was not the conscious initiative of the perpetrators and their first principles of racial supremacy that ‘caused’ the Holocaust but some kind of global mentality of science and technology spawned by Enlightenment. Such arguments divide German society from its institutions, such that Germans do not act through institutions, but institutions act upon Germans.⁶⁹¹

The bureaucrats described by Allen and Browning were more than lethal “cogs,” they demonstrated lethal initiative. Allen’s focus is narrow, his subjects are Nazis deeply involved in genocide and he does not venture larger conclusions about German society before or during the Holocaust. He does however stress the specificity of the Nazis’ use of “the benefits of modernity,” which they sought to “conform to their own dogma.”⁶⁹² It is the exceptional nature of the Third Reich that leads Allen to reject the use of the Holocaust as an indictment of modernity. Allen argues that while “modernity determined the unique means of the ‘Final Solution’ . . . it is wrong to see this as the necessary teleology of the Enlightenment rationality.” For “the crassest irrationality and modernization have never contradicted each other, least of all in the minds of Anti-Semites.”⁶⁹³

In “Bureaucracy and Mass Murder: The German Administrator’s Comprehension of the Final Solution,” Christopher Browning’s subjects are the “lower and middle-echelon personal” of what Hilberg called the “machinery of destruction.”⁶⁹⁴ In an earlier

⁶⁹¹ Ibid., 276.

⁶⁹² Ibid., 273.

⁶⁹³ Michael Thad Allen, “Modernity, the Holocaust, and Machines without History,” in *Technologies of Power: Essays in Honor of Thomas Parke Hughes and Agatha Chipley Hughes*, ed. Gabrielle and Michael Thad Allen Hecht (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 204.

⁶⁹⁴ Browning, “Bureaucracy and Mass Murder: The German Administrator’s Comprehension of the Final Solution,” xi.

article Browning acknowledged: “The mere existence of a corps of Jewish experts created a certain bureaucratic momentum behind Nazi Jewish policy.”⁶⁹⁵ While the language Browning uses to describe Nazi bureaucracy, such as “bureaucratic momentum” is often similar to Bauman’s, by exploring the histories of three bureaucrats, Browning shows that this “momentum” was powered by men who responded, not as mere functionaries, but as individuals, to the demands of the bureaucratic machinery.

Browning points out that all three individuals, although new to Jewish affairs, were Nazi party members and ambitious career men who “accepted unquestioningly the existence of a ‘Jewish problem.’”⁶⁹⁶ In this respect they were not unique, for Browning argues “virtually all German officials, fully shared the view that Jews had to disappear.”⁶⁹⁷ Browning contends that “none of these men conceived on his own of mass murder as a solution to the Jewish question.”⁶⁹⁸ In fact, he continues: “None of these case studies provides evidence that the Final Solution was launched or triggered by middle-echelon bureaucratic initiatives from below rather than by signals from above.”⁶⁹⁹ “Signals” is the operative term here – for none of these men received “explicit orders from above.”⁷⁰⁰ To put it crudely, these three administrators were able to anticipate their superiors’ wishes and “go with the flow.” This conclusion lends support to Baumann’s point that bureaucracy relies on subordinates recognizing the wishes of their superiors and making them their own. At the same time Browning’s research also indicates the

⁶⁹⁵ Christopher R. Browning, "The German Bureaucracy," in *Genocide, Critical Issues of the Holocaust : A Companion to the Film, Genocide*, ed. Alex Grobman, Daniel Landes, and Sybil Milton (Los Angeles, Calif. ; Chappaqua, N.Y.: Simon Wiesenthal Center ; Rossel Books, 1983), 147.

⁶⁹⁶ Browning, "Bureaucracy and Mass Murder: The German Administrator's Comprehension of the Final Solution," 132, 33.

⁶⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁶⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁶⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

importance of individual initiative; individuals are missing from *Modernity and the Holocaust*.

Browning shows how personal beliefs informed these men's actions, even as they were just "following orders." In stark contrast to Arendt's portrait of Eichmann, Browning concludes: "These were not stupid or politically inept people; they could read the signals, perceive what was expected of them, and adjust their behavior accordingly."⁷⁰¹ These bureaucrats may not have been ideology makers, but in their capacity as administrators they willingly executed actions aimed at solving "the Jewish problem." Although the subjects of Browning's analysis were elective members of the Nazi party who choose their own career paths, Browning describes their contribution to genocide, as a process of acclimation – a "gradual, almost imperceptible, descent past the point of no return."⁷⁰² This description contrasts with Bauman's picture where bureaucrats arrived on the scene ready to execute their duties regardless of the end result. In Browning's analysis individuals were aware of and largely reconciled to their role in genocide, at the same time that participation was made easier by the routine presentation of the "Jewish problem" as an administrative concern.

The Convergence of the High and Low Discourses

When situating the Holocaust in the framework of modern power structures, such as institutional science, bureaucracy, and the state, it is important to ask: if the Nazi genocide was perpetrated in the conditions of normative modernity, why did the Nazis keep the killing concealed from the majority of the public and use euphemisms to

⁷⁰¹ Ibid.

⁷⁰² Ibid., 144.

describe it, even in their own directives? That this was the case suggests that the perpetration of genocide violated (to different degrees no doubt) shared values about what were acceptable actions – values that existed, (or persisted?) in the conditions of modernity. It need not lessen the guilt of the perpetrators to recognize that, as Mommsen has reiterated in a recent article: “Relying on bureaucratic orders and accepting them as legitimate helped to neutralize possible moral apprehension concerning atrocities on a hitherto unheard of scale.”⁷⁰³ At the same time we should remember that, however much the form of bureaucracy in the Third Reich corresponds to modern bureaucracies generally, the Nazi bureaucracy functioned in a historically unique situation. As Arendt has emphasized in Nazi Germany moral actions were no longer legal ones; inhumanity had been declared legal.

A further argument against placing the Holocaust in the conditions of normative modernity is that the Nazi genocide was executed during world war. Many historians of the Holocaust (and of twentieth century genocide in general) have pointed to the importance of war for the context of genocide. War, like legality, helped inhumane and atrocious actions appear appropriate and even necessary. One could argue that world war and an illiberal legal system (or dictatorship) were as important for the execution of the Holocaust as modern bureaucracy.

Furthermore, while the complicity of modern institutions and technologies in the Holocaust should not be understated, Bauman perhaps goes too far when he grants bureaucracy agency. Weber called bureaucracy a “precision tool” applicable to a variety of ends as determined by its user. Yet Bauman goes further – according to him

⁷⁰³ Hans Mommsen, "The Civil Service and the Implementation of the Holocaust," in *The Holocaust and History : The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed, and the Reexamined*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Abraham J. Peck (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 224.

bureaucracy is not value-neutral, but rather a uniquely modern set of techniques which dictate its methods of use.

Bureaucracy is not merely a tool, which can be used with equal facility at one time for cruel and morally contemptible, at another for deeply humane purposes. Even if it does move in any direction in which it is pushed, bureaucracy is more like a loaded dice. It has a logic and a momentum of its own.⁷⁰⁴

Here Bauman's more radical critique lines up with Horkheimer and Adorno, who also saw enlightenment-style rationality as inherently dehumanizing and driven towards the service of domination. Bauman's critique overlaps with *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in significant ways. Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Bauman argues that the inability of Western society to be self-critical rests on its "deeply entrenched" origin myth, namely "the morally elevating story of humanity emerging from pre-social barbarity."⁷⁰⁵

Commitment to this "etiological" myth means that the Holocaust is most often explained as demonstrating civilization's "fragility," rather than its "awesome potential." In the "Afterward" to the 2000 edition of *Modernity*, Bauman calls Adorno and Arendt "solitary writers" who have undertaken the necessary but neglected task of viewing the Holocaust, not as an "aberrant episode *in* modern history," but instead as "an integral part of that history."⁷⁰⁶

In painting fascism as the most visible manifestation of a "total society," *Dialectic* represents the extreme conclusion of both the first and second discourses. In Horkheimer and Adorno's view rationalization dominates all areas of society, from the state down to the level of individual consciousness. Rationalization, born of enlightenment reason, has

⁷⁰⁴ Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 104.

⁷⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 223.

erased the other great product of the enlightenment -- the thinking individual. In factories and cinemas all people are now “harnessed to the same rhythms,” creating a collective based on conformity, not a community of authentic individuals. While there exist “conscious influences” deflecting the oppressed from the truth, “the powerlessness of the workers is not merely a ruse of the rulers *but the logical consequence of industrial society.*”⁷⁰⁷ The most disturbing conclusion to be drawn from *Dialectic* is this – that rather than a conscious program of oppression it is a self-sustaining system – “the total society” – which keeps us in an “iron cage.” What Weber in 1905 called a *Stahlhartes Gehäuse* (“shell as hard as steel”) has become so strong that in 1944 Horkheimer and Adorno write that all “efforts to escape it have finally transformed the ancient concept of fate.”⁷⁰⁸ “Fate” is no longer handed down to us by the gods, but in our efforts to be masters of our own destiny, we have ultimately enslaved ourselves. As the reign of Enlightenment continues, “progress is reverting to regression,” and produces “the international threat of fascism.”⁷⁰⁹

By the time Arendt and Bauman were writing the threat of fascism had receded but the “banal” conditions of a society run by instrumental rationality had not. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Simmel wrote that the “paradox” of “all higher cultures” is that progress increases the steps between our goals and their attainment. Even something as simple as buying bread now involves modern man in “an entanglement of apparatus, innumerable actions, and traffic patterns.” The “long strands of means and ends” that characterize modern life “make it completely impossible to remain clearly

⁷⁰⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic* 29. ; *Dialektik*, 43. My emphasis.

⁷⁰⁸ *Ibid.* ; *Ibid.*

⁷⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, xviii.

aware at every instant of the terminus of each strand.”⁷¹⁰ Simmel understood this situation primarily as a problem of the individual, who faced with a “jungle of enterprises and institutions” found that “final and definitely valuable goals are missing altogether.”⁷¹¹ At the same time he recognized that the individual benefited from the increased variety of experiences that the “complexity of higher life” offered.⁷¹² Writing in the decade after a disastrous world war, and on the eve of another one, Kracauer was much more skeptical about the benefits of rationalization, especially as offered to those most enmeshed in “enterprises and institutions” – *die Angestellten*. At work *die Angestellten* were not agents but dispensable functionaries, at play they were distracted, in the world of politics, they were dangerous. In Arendt’s account of Eichmann, the Nazi bureaucrat demonstrates nothing so monstrous as an employee personality – attempting to shore up a shaky social status through advancement in the enterprise, incapable of thinking for himself, and ready to perform all proscribed tasks regardless of the ends. When he attempts to write the Holocaust into the story of modernity, Bauman finds that Simmel’s ever lengthening and tangling strands of means and ends have resulted in a fatal blindness.

[When] actions are mediated by a long chain of complex causal and functional dependencies, moral dilemmas recede from sight, while the occasions for more scrutiny and conscious moral choice become increasingly rare.⁷¹³

Instrumental rationality, which characterizes not just the Nazi bureaucracy, but modern life generally, pushes the end goal of a given action so far out of view that moral

⁷¹⁰ Simmel, *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*, 3.

⁷¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷¹² *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷¹³ Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 25.

contemplation, and action, in regards to that goal becomes “increasingly rare” and difficult.

In his exhaustive and now canonical history of the Holocaust, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Raul Hilberg described a “machinery of destructions” motored by personnel who “were not supposed to look to the right or to the left” or “to have either personal motives or personal gains.”⁷¹⁴ Tellingly, Hilberg uses the passive voice to explain the operation of the Nazi machine: “At the threshold of the killing phase, the flow of administrative measures was unchecked. Technological and moral obstacles were overcome as the machinery moved “on a track of self-assertion.”⁷¹⁵ Since the publication of *Destruction* in 1961, historians have built on Hilberg’s work even as they have put the deeds of the perpetrators in more “active” terms, recognizing that Eichmann and many like him were motivated largely by ideology and acted not as mere “cogs” but as agents. Ultimately the revision of Eichmann’s story tempers the dark conclusions of Horkheimer and Adorno, Arendt, and Bauman. When we put the ideology back in we uncover a more human, if no less disturbing story – one where agency rests with people, not inanimate processes.

Historians’ accounts irrefutably demonstrate that the “machinery of destruction” did not run itself. As Arendt shows, in the courtroom, “cogs” are revealed to be human beings after all. In the work of the historians discussed here, instrumental rationalization is not the master of human beings, but a tool in their employ. As Hilberg himself acknowledged, “the onslaught did not come from the void; it was brought into being

⁷¹⁴ Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 277, 75. Michael R. Marrus calls *Destruction*, “probably the single most important book ever written on the subject,” Michael R. Marrus, “The History of the Holocaust: A Survey of Recent Literature,” *The Journal of Modern History* 59, no. 1 (1987): 116.

⁷¹⁵ Hilberg, 267.

because it had meaning for the perpetrators.”⁷¹⁶ This is not to deny the power of bureaucratic momentum, or that ends out of sight are easier put out of mind. This is to say that while the development and functioning of bureaucracy and rationalization must be understood historically at the level of government and economy, this is only a partial view. What these institutions mean for how individuals conduct their everyday life must also be considered. As the convergence of the two discourses shows, the division of the structural development of rationalization cannot be separated from what such developments mean for life. Even Weber failed, to our great benefit, to keep these two questions apart.

⁷¹⁶ Hilberg, 263.

Conclusion: “All Have Become Employees”

Reflecting on the history of culture, Simmel wrote that in the nineteenth century, “the idea of society” was for the first time understood to be “the true reality of our lives.” Individuals, no longer the heroic “men of reason” celebrated by Enlightenment humanists a century earlier, had become reduced to “a point of intersection of various social series.” While the individual was “*required* to relate his entire life to society,” the sum of the machine society had become much larger than its ‘individual’ parts. Society, Simmel explained, served as the “form” through which interactions between multiple individuals functioned, but society itself was not dependent on any single individual.⁷¹⁷

The nineteenth century vision of society as a set of relationships, built around exchange (or interaction), was expressed most profoundly in Marx’s critique of his century’s rapidly ascendant form of economic exchange -- industrial capitalism. In the notebooks that preceded *Capital*, Marx wrote: “Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand.” In other words, “society” is more than a collection of people; it is the force that determines the fates of its individual members. As Marx argued, the variety of individual social and economic statuses are not givens, but “are social characteristics, relations between human beings.” Foreshadowing Simmel’s own terminology, Marx contended that one is not a slave or a citizen independently of society, but only “in and through society.”⁷¹⁸

⁷¹⁷ Simmel, "Tragedy," 79. ; "Konflikt," 153.

⁷¹⁸ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse; Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, The Pelican Marx Library. (London,: Allen Lane, New Left Review, 1973), 265.

Society, as understood by the social theorists discussed in this dissertation, is constituted by social interactions – exchanges between individuals. How society is organized determines the nature of these interactions, and the ways available to individuals to practice and assert their ‘individuality.’ The nineteenth century saw the transformation of manual labor as the production of physical goods moved from the household and small workshops to the factory floor. Instead of directing the transformation of raw materials to finished products, the people producing industrial goods were increasingly involved in only a small portion of the production process. Personality was excised from the assembly line; instead of skill and expertise, the factory model of production relied on the standardization of tasks, and the exchangeability of individual workers who now served, not as agents, but functions in the industrial machine.

As mechanization was to the nineteenth century, organization was to the twentieth;⁷¹⁹ in the twentieth century, the rationalization of the industrial production process was transposed to areas of non-manual, or “intellectual labor.” Salaried employees, such as clerks, office-workers, and department store salespeople, increasingly performed a standard set of tasks. Like those of factory-workers, their employers valued conformity above individuality. The rationalization of white-collar work mirrored that of the factory assembly line, in so far as it aimed to standardize and streamline the work process. In spirit however, white-collar work followed the path blazed by modern bureaucracy. Intellectual labor of all kinds increasingly relied on the complex hierarchies and fixed procedures that had been perfected by the bureaucracies undergirding large firms, militaries, and governments. Whereas the interests of industrial workers and their

⁷¹⁹ Jacoby, *The Bureaucratization of the World*, 78.

employers were openly acknowledged to be divergent, the ideal salaried employee was expected, like the ideal bureaucrat, to treat the goals of his superior as his own, and to execute his tasks “*sin ira studio*” (without hatred or love).⁷²⁰ Employees and bureaucrats were trained to manage the methods, or “means,” of their particular function, without questioning, or perhaps even knowing, the ends.

Yet the methods of rationalization and bureaucracy were not limited to professional and bureaucratic offices. Modern society increasingly relied on complex economic, political, and technical structures in order to function. However, as these technologies of organization grew more complex, they became more difficult for the individuals who depended on them to understand. The social theorists discussed in this dissertation took the analysis of this situation as their primary task.

Weber argued that as technical knowledge and its applications increased, larger, meaning-giving explanations for the state of the world, most notably religious ones, became impoverished. As he wrote in 1917, the “savage” knows incomparably more about the mechanics of his daily life than a citizen of the most advanced metropolis. The modern world had become a “disenchanted” place, where the abundance of means pushed ultimate ends to the realm of the irrational.

In a rationalized society, all relationships come to be viewed through the lens of utility; people too were treated as means rather than ends. Rationalization greatly determined the tenor of social relations, and the range of options for maintaining individuality while surrounded by relentless standardization. For Simmel, this change was most visible in the struggle between individuality and standardization -- between the money economy’s demand for economic specialization and the metropolitan cultural

⁷²⁰ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 600.

economy's requirement of its citizens to showcase their personality. As Kracauer demonstrated in his study of white-collar workers, within these highly competitive monetary and cultural economies, rationalization quashed solidarity.

By the time Horkheimer and Adorno wrote *Dialectic*, rationalization had come to color all areas of modern life: its production, its society, its wars. The large-scale changes brought by the rationalization and bureaucracy described by Weber, in what I have called the "first discourse," had, as the theorists of the "second discourse" argued, come to determine, not just the means of production, but the "style of life." Horkheimer and Adorno warned:

The more heavily the process of self-preservation is based on the bourgeois division of labor, the more it enforces the self-alienation of individuals, who must mold themselves to the technical apparatus body and soul.⁷²¹

Under rationalization, individuals are quantified; as they become functions, they lose the ability to reflect on their roles and actions. Just a decade earlier, the Marxist (and former Weber student) Luckács had argued that the proletariat could achieve insight into their alienation and its causes, because "A position in the social structure carries with it . . . the probability that he who occupies it will think a certain way."⁷²² For Horkheimer and Adorno, all positions in a thoroughly rationalized, "enlightened" *Angestelltionzivilization* produced false consciousness, for "all had become employees."⁷²³ It was the *Angestelltionzivilization*, guided by the rational, bureaucratic spirit of means over ends that produced fascism.

⁷²¹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic* 23.

⁷²² This summary of Luckács' position in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) comes from his contemporary, the sociologist Karl Mannheim. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia : An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 264.

⁷²³ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic* 123. ; *Dialektik*, 162.

As Arendt and Bauman argued, bureaucracy is hostile to the self, to ends-based reason (*Vernunft*), and to humanity (*Menschentum*). The industrialized murder of the Holocaust relied not only on the dehumanization of its victims, but also on what Arendt called the near “perfect bureaucracy” practiced by its perpetrators. Such a bureaucracy privileges means over ends and closes off the question of absolute ends, thus signaling the end of ethical judgment, and of critical thinking itself. The “perfect bureaucracy” of Arendt’s Eichmann is motored by self-propelling means, the original ends having faded from view, just as Weber’s “specialist without spirit,” encased in a shell as hard as steel, or an “iron cage,” can remember only that he has a duty to the “calling” of his vocation, but not why.

By looking at major texts of Weber, Simmel, Kracauer, Horkheimer and Adorno, Arendt, and Bauman, I have argued that two strong and overlapping traditions of critique, or discourses, demonstrate a lineage that runs from the “iron cage” to the iconic Eichmann. This is not to say that Weber, Simmel, or Kracauer did, or could have predicted Eichmann, they did not. Instead, I am arguing that Eichmann’s lethal “banality,” as described by Arendt, made sense in large part due to the earlier analysis of rationalization and bureaucracy made by the German social theorists discussed in this dissertation.

Last year, the 50th anniversary of Eichmann’s Jerusalem trial was marked by museum exhibitions, public lectures, and academic conferences throughout North America, Europe, and Israel. The trial is rightly regarded as a key moment in the evolution of international law and in the understanding of the Holocaust’s place in the

histories of genocide and humanity.⁷²⁴ At the same time I believe that Eichmann, who claimed indifference to the ends achieved by his deeds, continues to resonate as an iconic figure for a different reason as well. Today more than ever, we live in what Simmel called a “mature culture,” where the smallest actions, from buying a cup of coffee, to making an online purchase, involves us in a “multiplicity” of means, so that “our pursuits take on the character of chains, the coils of which cannot be grasped in a single vision.”⁷²⁵ I believe we continue to read these thinkers, not just for their unarguable historical importance, but because the world they describe is still our own.

All of the thinkers and texts analyzed in this dissertation are well known. Looking at them together, organized around what I have called the first and second discourses of rationalization, grounds the iconic Eichmann in a broader tradition of critique. It also demonstrates that the full impact of large-scale rationalization as practiced by states and institutions is best understood and analyzed along side the impact of rationalization on the level of everyday life – in the office, the cinema, and the voting booth. Finally, framing these critiques of rationalization and bureaucracy around the discourses lets us look at familiar thinkers and texts in new ways. Reading Weber from this perspective, we can appreciate not only a masterly analysis of high-level bureaucracy, but what such pervasive rationalization means “for life.” Simmel, often dismissed as an intriguing but overly eccentric and undisciplined thinker, is no longer intellectually homeless, but a mediating figure between eternal questions of economic and cultural organization, and the everyday world of the modern metropolitan citizen. By treating Kracauer as not only a recorder, but also as a theoretician of the everyday, his Weimar writings become, not

⁷²⁴ See especially Lipstadt, *The Eichmann Trial*.

⁷²⁵ Simmel, *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*, 3.

just lively snapshots of the period, but pioneering examples of the analysis of mass culture. Finally, the connections between fascism and modern rationalization, as argued by Horkheimer, Adorno, and Bauman, are tested, revealing that such connections may not be as direct as they argue, and that rationalization and bureaucracy are neither inherently evil nor benign, but tools whose outcomes depend on the humans that wield them.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Jennifer J. Benner

Education:

University of Washington, Seattle, Washington

PhD., History 2012

Area of Specialization: Modern European Intellectual History

M.A., History 2003

Willamette University, Salem, Oregon

B.A. magna cum laude 1999

Major: Humanities

Publications:

Review of R. Kevin Hill, *Nietzsche: A Guide for the Perplexed*

H-German, H-Net reviews, June 2008

Review of Pierre Broué, *The German Revolution 1917-1923*, H-German, H-Net reviews, October 2005

Review of Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson, eds., *The Rosa Luxembourg Reader*, H-German, H-Net reviews, March, 2005

Teaching Experience:

Instructor, Department of History, University of Washington

History Senior Seminar: Weimar Germany, Fall 2006

Introduction to Intellectual History, Summer 2005

Teaching Assistant, Department of History, University of Washington

Total of eight quarters teaching European history, Fall 2002 to Winter 2008

Writing Tutor, University of Washington History Writing Center, 2001-2002

Writing Tutor, Willamette University Writing Center, 1999

Administrative Experience:

Undergraduate Advisor, University of Washington Department of History, 2003-2004

Language Abilities:

Reading and conversational proficiency in German; reading proficiency in French