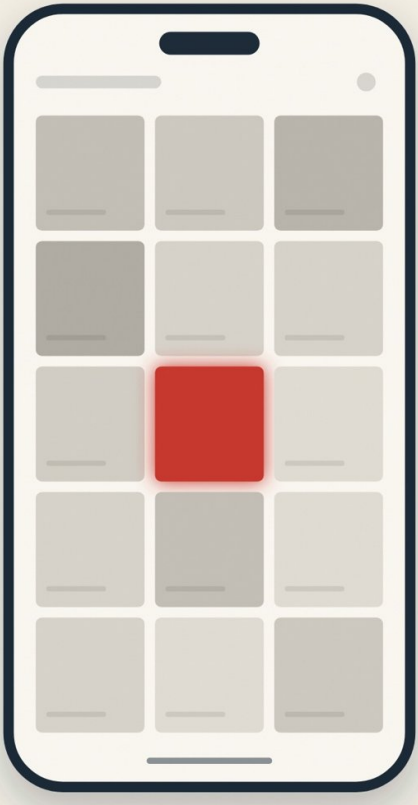
GEORG SIMMEL

THE METROPOLIS AND MENTAL LIFE

Fourteen Essays on Phones, Money and Loneliness in the Big City



NEW TRANSLATION

+ 14 NEW ESSAYS

Translated, with notes and essays, by

JULIAN DELPHIKI

Thinking School

The Metropolis and Mental Life

Fourteen Essays on Phones, Money and Loneliness in the Big City

Georg Simmel

Translated from the German, with notes and essays, by **Julian Delphiki**

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The Metropolis and Mental Life (Annotated): Fourteen Essays on Phones, Money and Loneliness in the Big City

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Thinking School

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Prologue: A Berliner Looks at Your Phone

If your phone tires you out even on days when you've done nothing, if you have more contacts than ever and feel lonelier, if your rent rises without anyone seeming to raise it, this book won't tell you it's your fault. It won't give you ten habits either. It will tell you that all of this is more than a hundred and twenty years old, and that someone explained it before the phone existed.

In the winter of 1902–03, an unsalaried lecturer from the University of Berlin stood up in Dresden to talk about big cities. He had no charts and no statistics. Among other things, he said that people in the metropolis receive so many stimuli that they end up reacting to none of them; that everything starts to look the same shade of gray; and that this indifference is not a flaw of character but a defense of the nerves.

He said it more than a hundred and twenty years ago. We read it today with a phone in the other hand.

This book exists because of that coincidence. Not because Georg Simmel foresaw the internet (he didn't, and it would be silly to ask him to), but because he described, with uncomfortable precision, what happens to a person when the number of impressions

they receive grows faster than their ability to digest them. He was thinking of the streetcar, the shop window and the pocket watch. We have the feed.

The American writer John Mark Comer, borrowing a definition from Cal Newport's *Digital Minimalism*, puts it in a way that gives me my starting point: noise no longer needs volume. Alerts, forecasts of disaster, outrage and trivia reach us silently through a screen. A quiet room with a phone in it isn't a quiet room. It's Simmel's overstimulation, made portable.

The numbers are familiar and don't need exaggerating. In its 2024 survey, the Pew Research Center found that nearly half of American teenagers (46 %) say they are online "almost constantly," up from 24 % a decade earlier. The informatics researcher Gloria Mark, who has been timing office workers at their screens for twenty years, found that the average stretch of attention on one screen fell from about two and a half minutes in the early 2000s to around forty-seven seconds.

Remember when the smartphone was going to free up our time? That was the pitch of nearly every ad in the first decade of the century: your office in your pocket, the world in your hand, freedom from the desk at last. The desk did disappear. The work stayed.

I have kept highlights for years. More than eight thousand, from about seven hundred books: philosophers, economists, media critics, Stoics, Zen monks, people who learned to live with less. When I finally read this lecture slowly I had an uncomfortable feeling: finding, in twenty-five pages from 1903, a denser version of much of what I had been underlining about attention, money and loneliness. This book is partly an attempt to sort out that feeling.

A warning about who is writing. I have earned my living in digital commerce since 2006. I have measured clicks, optimized conversion funnels, and explained every new wave of the industry to boards and to students. So this book isn't written from outside the machine but from inside it, by someone who knows how the dashboards he criticizes get made. At the risk of shooting myself in the foot.

Why this text

Other texts are usually quoted on distraction. Pascal and the man who cannot sit quietly in a room. Seneca, who took lodgings above a public bathhouse to prove the noise didn't bother him (and didn't quite prove it). Thoreau in his cabin. They are good texts, but they all say the same thing: withdraw, retreat, switch off.

Simmel says something more awkward. He says the big city exhausts us and frees us at the same time; that the coldness of the neighbor who doesn't say hello is the price of a neighbor who doesn't watch us either; that money levels everything and, for that very reason, lets us deal with strangers without depending on their goodwill. He doesn't ask us to go back to the village. He ends his lecture by saying that our task is "not to accuse or to forgive, but only to understand."

That sentence is the reason for this book. There are too many books that accuse the phone and too many that forgive it. This one tries something else: to read a 1903 lecture slowly and see which parts of it describe what is happening to us, which parts don't, and which parts describe it better than the reports of 2026.

What's in this book

First, some **context**: who Simmel was, why he was lecturing in Dresden, and what happened to his ideas afterward. Almost by accident, they founded urban sociology.

Then **the text**, in a new translation made directly from the German. It's short, about twenty-five pages, but dense: Simmel writes long sentences that think as they go. I have tried to keep them readable without flattening them. The notes explain the 1903 references (Ruskin, ground rent, the trade of the *quatorzième*) and the German words that have no English equivalent.

Then come **fourteen essays**. Each takes an idea from the lecture and sets it beside a problem of today: infinite scroll, the price of everything, loneliness in the crowd, anonymity online, smart cities, the move to the countryside with fiber broadband, the vanishing of places where you can be without paying, the personal brand, the stranger, love on the apps, housing, the crowd that never leaves home, work that consists of looking busy, and boredom. Each essay quotes Simmel briefly and argues with him. It doesn't always agree. They can be read in order or by family, following the four laws I summarize at the end of this prologue. Each essay ends with a question for the reader. It isn't advice: it's what I would ask myself.

At the end there is a chapter of **counterpoints**, with the strongest objections to Simmel and to this book, and a short **epilogue**. It contains no tips. Most books about digital life end with a list of ten habits. This one doesn't.

A word about the title. Simmel called his lecture *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben*, "The Great Cities and the Life of the Spirit." In English it has circulated for decades as *The Metropolis and*

Mental Life, and I've kept that title so the people looking for it can find it. But "mental" shrinks what Simmel meant. He wasn't only talking about the psychology of pedestrians. He was talking about what the city does to the spirit: that part of us that thinks, judges and prefers one thing to another. That, it seems to me, is what is really at stake when everything starts to look the same shade of gray.

The Four Laws of the Big City

If the lecture had to fit on one page, four laws would remain. Simmel didn't number them; I do, so they can serve as a map. Each essay in this book tests one of them in a place Simmel never knew.

1. The law of stimulus. When impressions arrive faster than we can digest them, the nerves defend themselves by ceasing to react. Simmel called it the blasé attitude: everything looks the same shade of gray. Today it plays out in the *feed*, in the office where what matters is looking busy, and in the boredom we no longer allow ourselves. Essays I, XIII and XIV.

2. The law of number. Money reduces everything to "the question of a mere *how much*." What has a price can be compared with everything, and what is compared with everything stops being unique. Today it plays out in the price that changes depending on who is looking, in the public bench that is no longer free, and in the apartment whose price rises by itself. Essays II, VII and XI.

3. The law of reserve. To survive among so many people, the city dweller keeps a distance. That distance is his freedom and also his loneliness: the same thing seen from two sides. Today it plays out in connected loneliness, online anonymity, the personal brand, the

stranger, the dating apps and the crowd that stays home. Essays III, IV, VIII, IX, X and XII.

4. The law of the clock. A city of millions works only with "the most exact punctuality," with calculation and timetables, and that machine tends to leave out whatever can't be scheduled. Today it plays out in the smart city, which aspires to be nothing but clock, and in the village with fiber broadband, where the clock follows us. Essays V and VI.

At the end of the book, "From 1903 to Today" runs through the fourteen essays with the same logic: what Simmel saw, what we see, and which law is at stake. It's a way back into the book without rereading it.

Context: Berlin and Dresden, 1903

The professor without a chair

Georg Simmel was born on 1 March 1858 in Berlin, at the corner of Friedrichstraße and Leipziger Straße, which was then becoming the commercial heart of the city. He was the youngest child of a family of Jewish origin that had converted to Protestantism. He lost his father at sixteen and inherited enough not to depend on a salary. That was just as well, because it took him most of his life to get one.

He took his doctorate in philosophy in Berlin in 1881. In 1885 he became a *Privatdozent*, a lecturer licensed to teach but with no post and no fixed pay, living on the fees of the students who came to his classes. Many came. His lectures became events in Berlin's cultural life, attended by students, artists and society ladies. His listeners included György Lukács, Max Scheler and a young American named Robert E. Park, of whom more later.

The university, on the other hand, did not want him. In 1901 he was given the honorary title of extraordinary professor. When the University of Heidelberg proposed him for a chair in 1908, a report by the historian Dietrich Schäfer, loaded with antisemitic tropes, helped give the post to someone else. Simmel did not get a full professorship until 1914, in Strasbourg, then part of Germany. He ar-

rived with the war. He died there of liver cancer on 26 September 1918, a few weeks before the armistice.

His work is huge and hard to classify. He wrote about Kant and Rembrandt, about fashion, flirtation, secrecy, the stranger, the handle of a vase and the ruin. His most ambitious book, *The Philosophy of Money*, appeared in 1900; his *Sociology* in 1908. He was always reproached for the same thing: that he was brilliant and unsystematic, that he wrote essays when he should have written treatises. Today that is why people still read him.

The cities exhibition

In 1903 Dresden hosted the first German Cities Exhibition (*Deutsche Städteausstellung*). It was a technical show: sewers, street lighting, streetcars, slaughterhouses, schools, hospitals, plans for new districts. German cities were growing at a frightening pace. Berlin had gone from about 800,000 inhabitants in 1871, when it became the imperial capital, to 1,888,848 at the census of December 1900. Most newcomers came from the countryside, above all from Prussia's eastern provinces.

To accompany the exhibition, the Gehe Foundation in Dresden organized a series of lectures in the winter of 1902–03. The volume that collects them includes a lecture on the population of big cities (seventy pages of statistics) and another on their political and military significance, among others. Simmel's was the one that asked what the city does to the people who live in it.

The lecture on politics and the military was by the historian Dietrich Schäfer. Five years later, the colleague who shared the table of contents with him wrote the report that shut him out of

Heidelberg. In Dresden, Simmel spoke about the reserve, the mistrust and the "slight aversion" hidden behind the politeness of neighbors. He had an example in the same book.

The lectures were published in 1903 in the foundation's yearbook under the title *Die Großstadt* ("The Big City"), edited by Theodor Petermann. Simmel's text runs to about twenty pages. It ends with a note in which he says he cites no literature because the underlying ideas are in his *Philosophy of Money*.

What happened next

The lecture outlived the exhibition. Robert Park, the American student who had heard Simmel in Berlin around 1899–1900, went home, ended up at the University of Chicago and helped found what is known as the Chicago School of urban sociology. In 1938, Park's student Louis Wirth published "Urbanism as a Way of Life," an article that translates many of Simmel's intuitions into the language of social science: size, density and heterogeneity produce relationships that are superficial, anonymous and utilitarian. For decades, sociology students read Simmel through Wirth and through the English translations of the 1940s and 1950s.

By another route the lecture reached Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, who put the big city, the *flâneur* and the crowd at the center of their thinking. Later it reached architects, planners and critics of technology, who quote it whenever a new machine promises to change our lives. Simmel's blasé attitude now turns up in articles about television, about mass tourism and, for some years now, about social media.

One thing should be said against him before we begin. Simmel did not study the city; he observed it from a very particular position, that of an educated bourgeois strolling through central Berlin. He says nothing about workers or maids (except as objects of the bourgeois's calculation), gives not a single figure and generalizes without embarrassment. The sociologists who came after him corrected a great deal, and the chapter of counterpoints collects the most serious objections. But what he saw, he saw well. That is why he is still read when almost no one remembers the other lecturers in Dresden.

The Metropolis and Mental Life

Georg Simmel (1903). A new translation from the German.[1]

The deepest problems of modern life flow from the individual's claim to preserve the independence and particularity of his existence against the superior powers of society, of historical inheritance, of external culture and of the technique of life. It is the latest form of the struggle with nature that primitive man has to wage for his bodily existence.

The eighteenth century may have called for liberation from all the ties that had grown up historically in state and religion, in morals and economics, so that man's originally good nature, the same in everyone, might develop unhindered. The nineteenth century may have demanded, beyond mere freedom, the specialization of man and of his work within the division of labor, which makes the individual incomparable and as indispensable as possible, but which for that very reason makes him all the more dependent on the complementary work of everyone else. Nietzsche may have seen the condition for the full development of individuals in the most ruthless struggle among them, and socialism may have seen it in the suppression of all competition.[2] In all of these the same basic motive is

at work: the resistance of the subject to being leveled and used up by a social and technological mechanism.

When we question the products of specifically modern life about their inner meaning (when we ask the body of culture, so to speak, about its soul), as it falls to me to do today with regard to our great cities, the answer will have to investigate the equation that such formations establish between the individual and the supra-individual contents of life: the adaptations by which the personality comes to terms with the powers outside it.

The psychological foundation on which the type of metropolitan individuality rises is the intensification of nervous life[3] that results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner impressions. Man is a creature of difference:[4] his consciousness is stimulated by the difference between the impression of the moment and the one before it. Lasting impressions, slight differences between them, the habitual regularity of their course and of their contrasts use up, so to speak, less consciousness than the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity within what a single glance takes in, the unexpectedness of impressions that force themselves upon us. By creating precisely these psychological conditions (with every crossing of the street, with the tempo and variety of economic, professional and social life), the metropolis sets up, in the very sensory foundations of inner life, in the quantity of consciousness it demands of us because we are made as creatures of difference, a deep contrast with the small town and with rural life, with the slower, more habitual, more evenly flowing rhythm of their sensory and mental image of life.

This makes intelligible, above all, the intellectualist character of metropolitan inner life, as against that of the small town, which rests far more on feeling[5] and on emotional relationships. For these are rooted in the less conscious layers of the soul and grow best in the calm evenness of uninterrupted habits. The place of the intellect, by contrast, is the transparent, conscious, uppermost layers of our soul; it is the most adaptable of our inner forces. To come to terms with the change and contrast of phenomena it does not need the shocks and inner upheavals that would be the only way for the more conservative feelings to adjust to the same rhythm of events.

Thus the metropolitan type (who is, of course, surrounded by a thousand individual variations) creates for himself an organ that protects him against the uprooting with which the currents and discrepancies of his external surroundings threaten him. Instead of responding to them with his feelings, he responds essentially with his intellect, to which the heightening of consciousness, produced by the same cause, gives priority in the soul. The reaction to those phenomena is thereby shifted to the least sensitive psychological organ, the one furthest removed from the depths of the personality.

This rationality, recognized in this way as a safeguard of subjective life against the violations of the metropolis,[6] branches out into many particular phenomena. Great cities have always been the seats of the money economy, because the variety and concentration of economic exchange give the medium of exchange an importance it would never have reached in the sparse trade of the countryside. But money economy and the rule of the intellect are most deeply connected. What they share is a pure matter-of-factness[7] in dealing with people and things, in which a formal justice is often paired with

ruthless hardness. The purely rational person is indifferent to everything genuinely individual, because relationships and reactions arise from it that cannot be exhausted by logical understanding, just as the individuality of things does not enter into the principle of money. For money asks only about what all things have in common, their exchange value, which levels every quality and peculiarity down to the question of a mere *how much*.

All emotional relationships between people are based on their individuality, whereas rational relationships reckon with people as with numbers, as with elements indifferent in themselves, of interest only for their objectively measurable output. This is how the city dweller reckons with his suppliers and customers, with his servants and, often enough, with the people he is socially obliged to see. It is the opposite of the smaller circle, in which the unavoidable knowledge of individual persons just as unavoidably gives behavior a warmer tone, something beyond the mere objective weighing of service and return.

What matters in the psychology of economics is this. Under more primitive conditions, goods are produced for the customer who orders them, so that producer and buyer know each other. The modern metropolis, however, lives almost entirely on production for the market, that is, for wholly unknown buyers who never come within the producer's field of vision. As a result, the interests of both parties take on a merciless matter-of-factness; their rationally calculating economic egoism has no need to fear any distraction from the imponderables of personal relationships. And this stands in such close interaction with the money economy (which dominates in the great cities, has driven out there the last remnants of

home production and direct barter, and every day further reduces work made to order) that no one could say whether it was that intellectualist frame of mind that first pushed toward the money economy, or whether the money economy was what determined that frame of mind. The only certainty is that the form of metropolitan life is the most fertile soil for this interaction. I will support this only with the remark of the most eminent English constitutional historian: that through the whole course of English history London has never acted as the heart of England, often as its intellect, and always as its purse.[8]

In a seemingly trivial feature on the surface of life, the same currents of the soul come together, in a way that is characteristic enough. The modern mind has become more and more a calculating one. The ideal of natural science, to turn the world into an arithmetic problem and fix every part of it in mathematical formulas, corresponds to the calculating exactness of practical life that the money economy has brought. It is the money economy that has filled the days of so many people with weighing, calculating, determining by numbers, reducing qualitative values to quantitative ones. Through the calculating nature of money a precision has entered the relations between the elements of life, a certainty in fixing equalities and inequalities, an unambiguousness in appointments and agreements, such as is brought about externally by the universal spread of pocket watches.

But it is the conditions of the metropolis that are both cause and effect of this trait. The relationships and affairs of the typical city dweller tend to be so varied and complicated, and above all, through the accumulation of so many people with such differentiated inter-

ests, their relationships and activities mesh into an organism with so many parts, that without the most exact punctuality in promises and performance the whole would collapse into an inextricable chaos. If all the clocks and watches in Berlin suddenly went wrong in different directions, even by as little as an hour, all its economic life and its traffic of every other kind would be thrown into disorder for a long time.[9] To this is added, apparently even more external, the size of the distances, which turns all waiting and every wasted journey into an expense of time that one simply cannot afford. The technique of metropolitan life is therefore unthinkable unless all activities and mutual relations are fitted most punctually into a fixed, supra-subjective schedule.

But here too appears what can, in general, be the only task of these reflections: that from every point on the surface of existence, however much it seems to have grown only in and out of that surface, a plumb line can be dropped into the depths of the soul; that all the most banal externals are ultimately connected, by lines of direction, with the final decisions about the meaning and style of life. The punctuality, calculability and exactness that the complications and the extent of metropolitan life force upon it are not only most closely connected with its monetary and intellectualist character. They must also color the contents of life and favor the exclusion of those irrational, instinctive, sovereign traits and impulses that want to determine the form of life from within, instead of receiving it from outside as a general, schematically precise form. Even if existences of this self-governing kind are by no means impossible in the city, they run against its type; and this explains the passionate hatred of the metropolis felt by natures like Ruskin and Nietzsche:[10] na-

tures that find the value of life only in what is unschematic and peculiar, in what cannot be defined with the same precision for everyone, and in whom, for that reason, the hatred of the money economy and of the intellectualism of existence springs from the same source as that hatred.[11]

The same factors that have thus congealed, in the exactness and minute-by-minute precision of the form of life, into a structure of the highest impersonality also work, on the other hand, toward something highly personal. There is perhaps no psychological phenomenon so unconditionally reserved to the metropolis as the blasé attitude.[12] It is, first of all, the consequence of those rapidly changing nervous stimulations, crowded together in their contrasts, from which the heightening of metropolitan intellectuality also seemed to us to arise. That is why stupid people, and people without any inner life to begin with, are not usually blasé. Just as an immoderate life of pleasure makes one blasé, because it excites the nerves to their strongest reactions for so long that in the end they give no reaction at all, so even harmless impressions, through the speed and contrast of their change, force such violent responses from the nerves, jerk them so brutally back and forth, that they give up their last reserve of strength and, remaining in the same surroundings, have no time to gather a new one. The resulting inability to react to new stimuli with the energy appropriate to them is precisely that blasé attitude which, in fact, every child of the metropolis already shows when compared with children from calmer and less varied surroundings.

With this physiological source of the metropolitan blasé attitude another one joins, which flows from the money economy. The essence of the blasé attitude is an indifference to the differences be-