The problem of technology as valuation errors: The paradox of the means in Simmel and Scheler

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A B S T R A C T

Georg Simmel and Max Scheler provide a framework for making judgements about the desirability of technological development and use, an evaluation absent from a largely relativistic contemporary sociology of technology. The appropriate role of technology in society is to aid in the attainment of ultimate values (ends). Both Simmel and Scheler framed the problem of technology as the elevation of technology to an ultimate value. The modern valuation of technology as an end is irrational because it is a reversal of the means-ends relationship and values the general development of technology instead of the potential benefits of particular technical developments. This inverted valuation is also detrimental to the cultivation of "subjective culture" and harmful to life. The importance of Simmel and Scheler for the contemporary sociology of technology is an illustration of what an evaluation of technology presupposes: claims about the general nature of modern technology as well as its essence. Although insightful, the cultural and phenomenological sociologies of technology found in Simmel and Scheler could be strengthened with structural analysis.

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1. Introduction

Over two decades ago, Winner ([63]: p. 372) argued that a number of formerly key issues in technology studies were "left out of view" when the field replaced thinkers like Marx, Mumford, Heidegger, and Ellul for a rather one-sided social constructionism, including: What are the social impacts of technology? What are the underlying structural influences on technological change? Is the particular technical artifact or system in question good or bad and the related "larger questions about technology and the human condition"? This project revisits the latter questions concerning the social, political, and moral dimensions of technology by revisiting the relationship between values and technology in the works of two German sociologist-philosophers who share a number of similar biographical and intellectual affinities [18]: Georg Simmel and Max Scheler.

To my knowledge, Simmel and Scheler have received little attention in technology studies, excluding Garcia's [12] excellent review of Simmel's analysis of technology, Tierney's ([50]: pp. 4f) acknowledgement that Scheler was one of the first thinkers to examine technology from the perspective of values, and Skrbina's

([47]: pp. 142f) recognition of Simmel and Scheler as two of the earliest critics of modern technology. This lack of explication is unfortunate as Simmel was one of the first social scientists to conceive of technology as "key phenomenon"—specifically as a problem of modernity—and that many later thinkers, such as Weber, Mumford, Ellul, and Marcuse, are directly or indirectly indebted to his analysis of technology [12].[1] Additionally, in his *Ressentiment* [35], *Problems of a Sociology of Knowledge* [39], and later formulations (e.g., [40]) Scheler—a sorely underappreciated sociologist [52], let alone sociologist of technology—laid further groundwork concerning the value dimensions of modern technology.

Revisiting Simmel's and Scheler's works on technology is fruitful for two reasons. First, they provide a value-fused analysis of the

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[1] Garcia's analysis stressed Simmel's formulation of a cultural view of the now controversial idea of an autonomous technology, or a technology that becomes an uncontrollable "immanent reality … without limits in its grandeur," following its own logic, and replacing choice ([12]: p. 162]), whereby intentional and valued technological developments have unintended consequences and "undermine what are or ought to be key concerns at another level" ([63]: p. 371, cf. [7]: pp. 133f, [27]: pp.72f, [60]). In comparison to Garcia's [12] explication, which cannot be repeated here in its thoroughness, this piece reinforces Simmel's relevance for modern sociological studies of technology by placing more emphasis on the place of technology in purposive action and the modern valuation of technology.

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relationship between technology and values. Empirical social scientific research today addresses the relationship between values and technology, treating both as independent and dependent variables (e.g., [6],[19]: Part 3, [27]: ch. 8, [51]). What makes Simmel and Scheler different from contemporary sociological studies of technology-values relations is the attempt to both explain *and* evaluate technology from the perspective of values, an endeavor with a long history in the philosophy of technology [15]. Simmel's and Scheler's arguments have little relation to contemporary institutional discussions of values, technology, and science ([62]: ch. 9) as the latter may have had the effect of coopting rather than heightening technology criticisms similar to Simmel's and Scheler's [11,61]. Simmel and Scheler provide a framework for making judgements about the desirability of technological development and use, an evaluative outlook largely absent from the sociology of technology today due to the relativistic "interpretative flexibility" of strong social constructionism since the 1980s (e.g., [33],[64], for critique, see [63]). In light of contentious and risky projected and emerging technical developments in, for example, biotechnology, nanotechnology, and geoengineering, it seems imperative to once again confront and think through technology as a problem for society (e.g., [1,7,17,20,25,30]). This does not necessarily involve "technophobic" conclusions or assumptions [29], but an acknowledgement of the blessings, potentials, *and* pitfalls of modern technology.

A promising route to revisit the problem of technology is a value-fused analysis of technology-values relations. As elaborated below, both Simmel and Scheler framed the problem of technology as the elevation of technology to a valued end, a tension Feenberg [8] deemed the "paradox of the means" and Li [22] referred to as a form of alienation in which technical means "overwhelm" ends. It is important to note that this argument rests on a broader conception of technology than a collection of useful artifacts. It is also an instrumentally rational attitude toward being, a conceptualization described well by Melzer ([28]: p. 292):

> [b]eyond physical instruments and the machines lies something that may be called the technological 'attitude', or 'way of thinking', or even 'posture towards Being': a non-specific but generally utilitarian understanding of ends, a primary focus on means and power, the restriction of reason to instrumental rationality − the methodical pursuit of the one maximally efficient way of doing each thing−, faith in human self-reliance and control, the belief in the superiority of the artificial to the natural and the mechanical to man, and the view that everything man encounters in nature or history is only raw material and that he is free to transform for his own purposes.

The second reason to revisit Simmel and Scheler is for the history of ideas. It is important to give credit to both for their overlooked contributions to the sociological study of technology. The limited purpose of this article is to illuminate their value-fused analyses of technology-values relations, which can be seen as an extension of a project that revisits classical sociological theory for the contemporary study of technology [13]. For example, Max Weber and Thorstein Veblen offered a number of compelling insights. Veblen's thought, which Weinstein ([58]: p. 46) accurately labeled "a conscious and explicit sociology of technology," explored the social dimensions of the development and diffusion of technology as well as technology's impacts on knowledge and social relations (e.g., [53,54,55]). Along with developing a critique of technology akin to Simmel's and Scheler's [24], Weber's sociology of technology (e.g., [56]), ahead of its time, emphasized the "social shaping" of technological development [2,16]. Considered with the insights left by Veblen, Weber, Mauss [26], Cooley [3], and others

(e.g., [49])—not to mention Marx (e.g., [34], [59]: ch. 2)—, the social theories of Simmel and Scheler further solidify classical sociology's relevance for the contemporary sociological study of technology [13]. Acknowledging their contribution also means recognizing the continuing implications of their work. I concur with others that older ways of thinking about the place of technology in society paradoxically open up new doors for exploration (e.g., [47,63]). For example, if the very notion of the "problem of technology" sounds outdated it is likely time to take up the inquiry again.

In what follows, I first explicate the ideas of Simmel and Scheler on the relationship between technology and values. Then I conclude with substantive principles on technology-value relations. I note that the cultural and phenomenological sociology of technology found in Simmel and Scheler could be strengthened with structural analysis.

2. Simmel on technology's elevation from a relative to ultimate value

Simmel's ([44]: p. 4) views on the money economy, culture, and the city cannot be fully appreciated without investigating his general take on technology, or, "the sum total of the means of a civilized existence." While his concern with technology can be found throughout his middle and later works, *The Philosophy of Money* [42] is the most relevant work, a study of "the purest and most perfect technical expression of exchange" ([47]: p. 141), a "mediating instrument" ([12]: p. 137), or, as Simmel ([42], p. 210) put it, the "purest example of the tool." That is, the *opus* of one of sociology's founders is a work in the sociology of technology (though, to be sure, the book crosses disciplinary boundaries) ([10]: p. 95). The work is as much an analysis of the social implications of money as it is an exploration of the social characteristics of money. Regarding the former, Simmel argued that money has fundamentally transformed the way individuals can experience the world of society and things and, more than any other tool, has cast social relations into their modern *Gesellschaft*-like characteristics; as instrumentally rational, calculative, impersonal, etc. Yet, at the same time, money "embodies the modern spirit of rationality, of calculability, of impersonality" ([5]: p. 193) as a "crystallization" and "reification" of the function of exchange as an independent form ([42]: pp. 174f).

Although the brilliant and subtle analysis of the "purest tool" itself should elevate *The Philosophy of Money* to classic status in the sociology of technology, Simmel's greater contributions for the subfield are contained in the subsections devoted to technology in general. In his analysis of purposive action, he argued that the formulation of an ultimate purpose or absolute value depends on some knowledge of suitable means to achieve the given valued end, forming a "teleological series" of means to its attainment ([42]: ch. 3). The human is the "indirect being" ([44]: p. 3) whose very nature is supposedly to "multiply and ramify" the means to the ends sought by desire ([57]: p. 123). Longer series of means afford us "more, and more essential, ends" ([42]: p. 208) and tools (technological means) are the "intensified instruments" developed to attain these ends. Although technological means only have a "relative value" by bringing about an ultimate value (the desired end), one often must focus on these means to attain the end. The result is a situation in which means must be treated as ends for periods of time, until a given valued end is attained. This necessity has increased in intensity and time in modern societies, where

> the intentions of people can no longer be achieved through simple, obvious, direct actions. Instead, they are gradually becoming so difficult, complicated and remote that one requires