

Death, happiness and the meaning of life: The view from sociology

Journal of Classical Sociology

1–15

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DOI: 10.1177/1468795X14558761

jcs.sagepub.com



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Abstract

This article recovers the understated engagement with the question of mortality and the relationship to death in life through a reading of the classics of sociology – Durkheim, Marx, Simmel and Weber – in order to dramatize the relationship of such a concern to the imaginary of perpetual happiness idealized by the bourgeoisie of each generation and exemplified by Lacan as the ‘problem’ of the city. If engaging mortality is conceived as an example of the thinking of limits, I suggest that this ban parallels disavowing the question of meaning that the bourgeoisie have cultivated and perfected in the name of practical thinking. In this way, the bourgeoisie can be said to have mastered the secret of life and the connection between mental hygiene and intellectual parsimony celebrated by Kant as the advance of enlightenment. This adjustment is located at least as far back as the Stoics and replayed in much thought and in popular culture as a symptom of the self-destructiveness of the fixation on ‘ultimate meaning’ and its realistic pursuit in life. In this sense, the conditions of citizenship in the city are said to require a systemic disregard of such ‘deep’ concerns on Kantian grounds that their inaccessibility and irresolute character can only distract circumspection from its limited goals. Georg Simmel is maintained as the classical figure who both engaged death (and so the risk of thinking limit) and suffered marginalization for this, making his resolution of this tension not tragic, as his idiom suggests, but an exemplification of sociological artistry and of the playful relationship to life that it promises when unencumbered by the fear of the bourgeoisie.

Keywords

Bourgeoisie, death, limits, meaning, theory

Introduction

The topic of death, often monopolized by theology, philosophy and even psychology through its studies of grief and bereavement, has rarely been treated as a signature of

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sociological theorizing except perhaps in empirical studies such as Durkheim's (1951) *Suicide*. Yet, in the sociological canon and particularly the classical works of Durkheim, Simmel and Weber, a dialogical engagement with death as a collective representation is developed in ways often unstated and unthought. I want to make this engagement transparent as a discursive focus. I proceed by showing how the topos of death and its social character opens up inquiry in important ways, especially with respect to social relationships to meaning and what is called limit thinking. On this basis, I offer food for thought concerning the relationship between the treatment of death and (what Parsons called) 'ultimate meaning' as topics on grounds of the charge that the morbidity of one (death) and the irresolute character of the other (ultimate meaning) can elicit only gratuitous fascination that needs to be put to rest as impractical, idle, antisocial or even subversive.

Form-giving significance

In every age, the cultivation of the innermost dimension of life interacts closely with the meaning it ascribes to death. How we perceive life and death are merely two aspects of a fundamentally unified attitude.

(Simmel, 2007: 73)

Georg Simmel sets upon this problem of the relationship between death and life and how it is represented as a collective representation. This means that he begins to frame the relationship to death as a problem in life, and as such, as a social phenomenon. Does death drive life or does life drive death from its precinct? Simmel's (2007) answer,

[I]n every single moment of life we are those who must die, and each moment would be different if this were not in effect our predetermined condition. Just as we are hardly already present at the moment of our birth, but rather something is continuously being born from us, so too do we hardly die only in our last moment.

(p. 73)

'Form giving significance' is a way of saying that death drives life by inducing us to make something out of life, that the limitation that death brings to mind invites us to reflect upon how we make life matter or give it value. But this relation still seems contingent and intelligible in many ways unless we listen closely to Simmel's 'form-giving significance'. First, while Simmel is arguing for the place of death in life as a vital force not at all morbid, as having 'form-giving significance', this awareness holds only for one attuned to such a relationship and to the need to keep it in mind throughout life in contrast to what Heraclitus called the sleepwalkers who push it aside. In contrast to these sleepwalkers, there are others whose only preoccupation in death is to avoid it, the survivors. Finally, there are those who treat death as modelled in the inert signifier or word, recognizing that this dead letter drives life, and so, that death is significant to life, but as an undifferentiated source of meaning-making, causing the social construction of value under its auspices. Simmel differs from sleepwalkers, survivors and social constructionists in suggesting that death invests life with a desire for form and its discipline, and so, with an ideal (or ought) striving for more than survival,

meaning-making or social construction, the desire to disclose in the diversity of life and its practices, the binding imperativeness of some sense of form in any situation of action, which means, some sense of the way in which the imaginary must be configured in social life for all actions and for friends and enemies alike.

Because Simmel (2010) grasps life as the Nothing in its primordial multiplicity in its being one thing as easily as any other, making Something out of Nothing reveals the connection between making and the Ought since any making needs to be guided by what it is that is being made. If death drives life insofar as the Ought (as the value of the need for collectedness) drives making, then death drives life to engage the form (Ought) imagined as binding the diversity of what is made. The Ought takes shape both in driving social inquiry (the value assumed to ground inquiry in asking what is the value of inquiry) and in driving inquiry to work-through the material of the action studied (the value assumed to guide the content or commonplace in asking what is the value grounding sociability, composing a painting, a vase, gratitude, superordination). The Ought is a modernization of the Good in Plato. Death drives life to discern the power of the Ought through the message of the imaginary in any and all social phenomena. The imaginary is not the Good, but the theatre in which its variety and convoluted mixing and matching comes into play as our subject matter, the colliding manifestations of the Ought that we need a method to navigate, but a method that measures itself by respect for this play of the Ought. Death drives life insofar as it drives inquiry to submit to the Ought as guiding it and whatever it inquires into, subject and object becoming one in the folds of value, of the Ought. If the dead letter drives life as in the Lacanian formula, Simmel's embellishment says that the dead letter drives the need and desire to engage the Ought in any social endeavour, but always in ways that leave the relationship of the inquirer to the Ought as the uncertain legacy of the wide-awake subject of mortality. Thus, Simmel suggests that death drives life not simply in the way of making-meaning, but to accept the constraint of measuring words and deeds by respect for the continuation of a dialogical focus, and so, for some vision of shared being and of its remainder as fundamentally ambiguous.

In contrast to Weber and Durkheim, Simmel could have said, while it might be important for life to forget death in order to maintain its liveliness (to 'bracket' it in some sense?), it is important not to forget that we forget (to do a turn from Derrida [2002] in another context). Simmel knows that in study and reflection upon the relations of life to death, such work is itself a way of negotiating that border and of affirming life through the art of a method of inquiry whose very topic in any study is the collision between form and life, and the question of whether and/or how the word is best brought to life. Any Simmelian analysis formulates the practice with an eye to the question of what conditions invest it with life essentially rather than externally, and how the collision between such conditions in the practice implicitly reflects the struggle in the narrative to make reference to the conditions that invest *it* (the analysis) with life essentially rather than externally. Here, Simmel treads a line that much inquiry would like to put to rest or exclude, much like death, the unspoken difference between what is essential and external. Is the risk of speaking at this border of meaning not analogous to the risk in any preoccupation with death? Yet, this is done as a way of working-through and developing a conversation over what kind of theorizing can resist deadening whatever it studies and what methods can be proposed for this.

Here, the problem of the relation of death to life is posed in the way of the human sciences, asking after the relation to death as a living practice in a manner that might and should activate sociology and psychoanalysis, among others. I want to begin to examine one part of such a discourse by asking how the material condition of death is represented in collective life as either/or (or neither/nor as Rancière says [see Blum, 2011b on either/or vs neither/nor]; see Rancière, 1999, 2009, and its treatment in Blum, 2011b) to empower or undermine the desire that life is imagined as requiring.

The secret of life

Curiously, we owe to the sociologist Max Weber (1930) the key to the secret of life, from *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* where he said of capitalism ‘the problem is that of the Western bourgeoisie class and of its peculiarities’ (p. xxxvii). Now if we think of capitalism as a figure of speech for the rut life inevitably falls into or follows, and of living a life as living in this manner and with these means as such, then something about the bourgeoisie should inform us about life and how to live it and alternatively could counsel us on the manner and means of morbidity (of death, the living death and how best to avoid it). Thus, Weber, the sociologist, might be offering us advice on how to be bourgeoisie where that can be understood as how to live life without permitting death to interfere, that is, how not to allow ourselves to be distracted by death. I think Weber is saying that though death is inevitable, it is the bourgeoisie who have mastered the art of concentrating upon life in a way free from that distraction. But then Simmel says that it is a vital part of the thoughtful life that thinks limits, to preserve the sense of death as an omnipresence in life.

Note how Lacan (1992: 303–304) creates a tension between happiness (which he identifies with the circulation of goods in the city) and death (which he identifies with thinking of limits). What is the relationship of happiness to death and how is the city factored into this relationship, or better, how does the materialism of the city dramatize the tension here?

As I believe I have shown here in the sphere I have outlined for you this year, the function of desire must remain in a fundamental relationship to death. The question I ask is this: shouldn’t the true termination of an analysis – and by that I mean the kind that prepares you to become an analyst – in the end confront the one who undergoes it with the reality of the human condition? It is precisely this, that in connection with anguish, Freud designated as the level at which its signal is produced, namely ... distress, the state in which is that relationship to himself which is his own death ... and can expect help from no one.

Lacan sets up death and our relationship to it in life as the locus of a discourse on happiness. Why should happiness be implicated in death unless we assume that the haunting of life by death (its undercurrent) compromises happiness? And yet if happiness is occasional, intermittent or even current, what is the relation of such a state to the thought of death? Better yet, how does (should, could) the thought of death influence life?

Lacan (1992) offers the provocation as follows:

Should the theoretical and practical purpose of our action be limited to the ideal of psychological harmonization? In the hope of allowing our patients to achieve the possibility of an untroubled happiness should we assume that the reduction of the antimony that Freud himself so powerfully

articulated may be complete? I am referring to what he expresses in *Civilization and Its Discontents* when he affirms that the form in which the moral agency is concretely inscribed in man – and that is nothing less than rational according to him – the form he called the superego, operates according to an economy such that the more one sacrifices to it, the more it demands.

(p. 302)

Life then asks increasingly more of the one it seduced to desire, to need and to lack:

When in conformity with Freudian experience one has articulated the dialectic of demand, need and desire, is it fitting to reduce the success of an analysis to a situation of individual comfort linked to that well-founded and legitimate function we might call the service of goods? Private goods, family goods, domestic goods, other goods that solicit us, the goods of our trade or our profession, the goods of the city, etc. Can we, in fact, close off that city so easily nowadays? ... To make oneself the guarantor of the possibility that a subject will in some way be able to find happiness even in analysis is a form of fraud.

(Lacan, 1992: 303)

Thinking at the limit is engaging the ‘distress’ of one’s finitude, that is, thinking in a way alive to one’s death. This follows according to Simmel because the thought of death for the subject passing through a life creates the need and desire to reflect upon this passage as grounded in the way of a narrative with beginning and end, that always qualifies as a story about the passage that invariably is oriented to as a mark of value that distinguishes its bearer. The life and the Ought belong together insofar as the mortality of the passage drives their togetherness and need for discrimination. If death is disconcerting and in this way disturbs life and its aspiration to be comfortable with itself, then the thought of death as provocation becomes a theoretic strategy designed to subvert that very comfort which we can think of in this image of the city (collective life) as a circulation of goods, a circulation designed to produce a prosaic sense of ‘psychological harmonization’ reflected in the notion of domestication. Then, the thought of death, properly aligned with the uncanny against domestication as if a sudden apparition, begins to point to the strange and queer sense of words and action, of life, when it is challenged by the thought of limit (Wittgenstein, 1958; see also Blum, 2003, 2011a, 2011b; Blum and McHugh, 1984; Cavell, 1979). It is as if these are countervailing forces, agonistic elements in the terrain of life, the city as the circulation of goods and over against this, the thought of limits, of death. Life then seems to have a secret automatism, as if a spell exercised upon us that keeps us working at it, the automatism we tend to capture in the formula of happiness and its chase:

There’s absolutely no reason why we should make ourselves the guarantors of the bourgeois dream. A little more rigor and firmness are required in our confrontation with the human condition ... The establishment of the service of goods at a universal level does not in itself resolve the problem of the present relationship of each individual man to his desire in the short period of time between his birth and his death.

(Lacan, 1992: 303).

The ‘rigour and firmness required in our relation to the human condition’ confirm that he does not renounce life or give up on life in his talk of death because he speaks for a

relation in life, a living relation of rigour and firmness that has the desire to think limit, to think against the grain of the city in its domesticated shape as the circulation of goods. Theorizing as the thought of death can be nothing other than discipline or measured relations to civic speech and its formulaic distinctions, a way that demands and disciplines its talk precisely so as not to obey life mindlessly or reject it out of despair. Thus, happiness as a convention that could be otherwise, and is not to be celebrated or condemned mechanically, is a distinction, as formulaic as it is, that has to be engaged playfully and ironically in the guise of a theoretic actor who knows both its conventionality and its necessity as 'equipment for living' (Burke, 1957) in the way of living distinctions that have a place in life at some time but could also be otherwise and elsewhere. So, if the bourgeoisie is a figure that represents the happy immersion in life and its pursuits, this allows us to understand Marx's cryptic comment on the proletariat, saying that they disclose the secret of capitalism. I suggest that he intends the proletariat to stand for the extinction of desire as a matter oriented to, as more of the same repetitively reinstated by life in its course. Their secret: the proletariat know that the bourgeoisie lie about life and death, acting as if there is no death; the proletariat know that life is more of the same, and that desire is never fulfilled except through dreamwork (see Blum, 2003).¹

Death and the category

We see how Sociology marks life by death in very important and generic ways when we examine the great founders, Durkheim, Weber and Marx, each more or less accepting the notion that an investment in life requires a degree of unreason or irrationality due to the seductiveness of mortality itself and the hold of life upon the human subject. So Weber was struck by the irrational commitment to work as a surrogate form of salvation in the absence of any definitive reassurance about one's eternal life, making the commitment seem interesting to him by virtue of this very immersion in productive labour, as if a defence against the terrifying recognition of one's abandonment. Durkheim too imagined egoism as the natural lot of such a subject unless the social attachment, its complicated regimes of affiliation and expectation, could provide satisfaction strong enough to rectify separation. Both Weber and Durkheim view the fact of mortal life as potentially distracting in ways that need to be reimagined, reinvented, through what some might call fantasies about living on what we can think of after Kenneth Burke (1957) as 'equipment for living' (I examine this conception of Kenneth Burke and develop an extended discussion of Weber's imaginary exchange with Tolstoy in Blum, 2013c) (pp. 253–262). The notion of life as an adjustment in this sense invites conceiving of the subject as reflective in an altogether different way, resisting what is known with some degree of zest and animation that might move with pleasure against the grain, that is, against itself, in ways that could appear self-destructive as if this is what life needs. While neither of these men took up the challenge of formulating the imaginary of such a modern subject, both identified the import of insistent drive in life as compelling.

Marx's notion of life as deadly was reflected in his division of the population into two classes as if a diversion (the 'rat race') needed to distract them from apprehending the barren uniformity of social life that must invariably interrupt the collective sense of its natural equality. This notion of equality, of all humans as equal under the sign of mortality, at one and the same time makes of such a collective a horde fated to pass time until

its death and immune to stimulation in the absence of anything for which to strive. In imagining these two classes, the haves and have-nots, he gave them each something to live for – accumulation, acquisition, holding on if lucky and aspiring to the same if unfortunate, imagining life as a game with winners and losers, allies and enemies, definite outcomes, rules and skills, plots and conspiracies, and bodies of know-how to be mastered in learning one's place and path.

In this way, if life needs to distract the human subject from death, everyone lives in accord with the illusion of stratification and by virtue of the need to learn about this illusion as such and to expose all to its dynamic. If self-worth is falsely tied to such an order (as if having and not having means what the order of stratification requires), then education must either be deceit or confrontation, with confrontation working to unsettle the illusion, and deceit simply seeking to pass it on. Marx tries desperately to make life satisfying for those who are tempted to treat it otherwise as if the repetitious reiteration of the same (Blum, 2003). Thus, if Marx intuits how the bourgeoisie can continue living (their delusion about their self-worth prevents them from reflection, or makes them indifferent, which is the same), he poses the problem of how the proletariat can come to think of life as mattering, in the absence of the advantage of such distraction (and illusions) of the bourgeoisie.

Marx poses the problem of how one can live without illusion, not just pathetically or in resignation, but with a passion for life, trying to reinvent the imaginary of the proletariat as a reason d'être for living as such. In this gesture, as an unanticipated consequence of Marx's humanity, he also offers the emancipated segment of the bourgeoisie the opportunity to impersonate such an imaginary while remaining untouched as they are, as haves, by enabling them to think of themselves as proletariat, creating under the guise of critical thinking the delusional imaginary of liberalism as if a kind of cross-dressing. That is, if the lucky or opportune with advantage are to escape the burden of guilt, they need to imagine themselves as comparable to the proletariat (i.e. that knowing the truth of the lie gives them the kind of empathy that identifies them as the same, essentially). Similar in mind and not body, both classes are then fated to be the living dead, equal in that respect, equal by virtue of living without illusion. What Marx knows is that life cannot be endured without a fantasy, whether the imaginary of just deserts, of accumulation, inheritance and succession, or revolution, that life requires a belief in its mattering and that the two classes serve as a dramatic image of two shapes taken by such practices, as anomie (passing time, bourgeoisie) and toil (doing time, proletariat).

Classification

Durkheim's ambivalence towards death is reflected in different places and with often disparate implications (Durkheim, 1933; see Blum, 2013b for other examples). Durkheim redeems his indifference to the category or distinction (to the signifier) by showing how any category, in order to be meaningful, that is, to be alive and vital rather than dead, has to be made explicit and concrete as a social bond. Here is how he proceeds: any category, say, gender, age, race, Welsh, American, is abstract, undeveloped and implicit (empty in the idiom of Lacan) because the word (e.g. women) conveys an indivisibility that can only mask its internal diversification. The category is dead in the way any characterization is dead, announcing a unity supplied by the name and nothing more. In *Suicide*, Durkheim (1961: 180–202) proceeds by animating each category, imagining its diverse

living conditions (thus, married or single women, urban or rural women, Protestant or Catholic women, women who work and women who do not) and in this way brings a category to life by enumerating the different ways in which it can be said to be attached to behaviour. Yet, the list of variations seems to show that the category has no weight or force to collectivize the different ways it is done. Durkheim calls the social environment of such a category egoistic, existing only in and through its variations, as if all we might say about women or Americans (or about virtue as the 'swarm of bees' in Plato's *Meno*) is that there are many kinds. This is the way of political economy according to Durkheim, the world of optimizing and transactions imagined between monadic, self-oriented agents (see Parsons, 1949 for what must remain the best discussion).

Durkheim recognized in social life a countervailing tendency to arrest egoism through a stipulation of unity that invites loyalty and sacrifice at the expense of the diminution of voice. If Durkheim names such unity altruistic, it is for the reason that the sacrifice to the category occurs at the expense of the subject in ways that equate everyone by virtue of their being ruled by the same category as in a stereotype. Thus, the category has no weight when all women are treated as different and it has no weight when all women are treated as the same: such extremism in the deadly social environment does not nourish the mixed life in the relation of difference to unity. Therefore, if variation is at first necessary to animate the category, its unity must be redeemed and recovered in a way that is not stereotypical. Thus, in recognition of the importance of human variation for life, Durkheim shows the dangers of too much or too little as originating the desire for a mean position, making a reflective relationship to desire and its governance the sign of a healthy social life (and he goes further, suggesting that even a healthy environment is permeable and can become sick, forecasting in his way the impermanence of everything that comes to be).

So the category, like the statistic, is dead until animated by the capacity to imagine it as neither unregulated nor oppressive but as a relationship of limit to unlimited, of category to desire. For example, if the code limits the category of woman in the way grammar determines what we see, expect, name and the like in relation to this regime, free individuals can still be inventive in relation to the code and the bond it both presupposes and implies. This is to say that being represented as man, woman, Welsh, American, is being identified as a subject of a symbolic order and as one necessarily subject to the inclusions, exclusions, rights and relationships this order maintains (see Durkheim, 1961: 297–325). At its best, the category operates as a social world in microcosm, binding, bonding and orienting its subject in ways designed to depict a hold much stronger than a characteristic. Durkheim identifies this relationship of individuation to integration as the terrain of the symbolic order and of the ambiguous relation between the signifier (woman) and the process of signification through which it emerges. Thus, the category (woman, whatever) is only alive and vital when it is seen neither as a context for egocentrism nor for tyranny but as itself an object of desire as if a paradigm or standard of guidance. If life counteracts the living dead in any social environment, counteracts the altruistic and egoistic ties to life, then the speaker for vitality as a speaker for the category as a bond is the ideal speaker who orients to the category as if an ideal, as if what unifies the variety of women can only be the desire to make transparent the category as itself an object of desire. Thus, for any category, we can say that the ideal speaker is pro-life, must be conceived as that course of action that confirms the life of the category by rising above its externality in bringing it to view as if a standard of action. This is how we could

say at the start of this exposition that Simmel had to formulate the relation of life to death as an ideal speaker.

This links the category to Benjamin's (1969) conception of the aura, for when Benjamin says of the relation that it originates in the primordial experience when 'the person we look at or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn' (akin to Parsons' double contingency). Similarly, if we invest the category (the word, the signifier, the inanimate mark) with 'the ability to look back at us', we not only create a relationship (in a way that aesthetically can be said to do a neutralization of the commonplace by transforming it), but we also endow this lifeless 'thing' with a capacity to rule us or hold us accountable in some sense by our looking up to it not as if it is punitive (aka: supergo) but in accord with Lévinas' notion of the face that we see reflected in it as a sign of its openness to interpretation and vulnerability in that sense. In this experience of the aura, we bring the category to life, and if we revitalize our self in this gesture, it is only possible because we are prepared to see-as (see Blum, 2011b: 37–38) in this way, that we desire of our self that we can rise to this occasion, investing the near-at-hand with this strange power to look back, to hold us accountable for its being seen, and in its way to make us 'look up' by reminding us of something Other than other.

Like Durkheim, Max Weber treats death from the point of view of life in asking the question of the meaning of life, or what makes life worth living. Both Durkheim and Weber seem to imagine the subject as naturally drawn towards death but for an intervention that would help keep her alive. It is irrelevant that the intervention is the social tie in Durkheim and a dutiful commitment in Weber, because what collects them is that the intervention seems to both sociologists as if an irrational belief given the reality of human mortality. We could say that in this way sociology questions the self-evidence of life itself by finding it queer or odd in Wittgenstein's (1958) sense, odd that humans would keep on with life in the face of such inevitability.

More important, both say that this keeping at life is uncanny because it is not perfunctory or a matter of adapting with resignation to bad conditions, but devoted and enthusiastic to the point where it exceeds the expectations of these observers, that life and living is embraced in ways that can have important worldly results. Life then takes on a charged meaning when it seems to be lived at the edge of the border between living and dying, reminding us of Bataille's (1985: 116–130) formula for the general economy involving action guided by the expectation of loss as great as possible (war, gambling). Living at the edge (with an awareness of death in this sense) becomes the passion that enters into the overstimulated ambitious strivings both of anomie and of the energetic enterprising activities of commerce.

Whereas Durkheim more or less disregards the dynamics of this excess, anomie arising out of the desire to heal or reconcile the tension between the social and the personal, it seems that the instability of desire is a function of the continuous frustration aroused by unrealized satisfactions. That is, life must arouse desire that it cannot fulfil and can only displace in (what Lacan calls) frustration and aggression aroused by the desire of and for life, creating the constant alienation of the subject fated always to fall short of his or her own expectations. Durkheim's interlocutor could only be embodied as the stoic advice to limit one's expectations as a way of erasing the possibility of disappointment. Getting people to do more than is necessary is certainly the theme of Weber's *Protestant Work Ethic*, narrated as the progressive induction of the subject to embrace what is

external (work) as a necessity, forcing him to elevate his interest in work by imagining it as the kind of activity his (and any) life requires to be meaningful.

Bourgeoisie: Life affirmation and flexibility

In Marx, the relation of bourgeoisie and proletariat reinstates this connection of life to death in showing how the death drives itself as life-affirmative and life-preservative depends upon contingencies not easily disregarded, such as poverty, but also misfortune and disease. Thus, the bourgeoisie personify that prized flexibility that the continuation of life requires of its subject. This means that obsolete objectives have to be redefined and not expurgated, have to be revised under the auspices of a rigorous notion of flexibility that takes the measure of 'obsolete' attachments to metaphysics, recalculating them under the auspices of a new vision of communal accord in any present. But we must never forget how this great flexibility in self-development is exercised by foreclosing any and every thought of death.

The relentless revision of the relation to mortality in each present is empowered by what Weber noted as the link between inner isolation and the continuing need for proof of self-worth, the constant need for the reassurance of demonstrable productivity that remains the same even as its concrete conditions change. This is akin to the libidinal investment in self-love that Freud described in self-preservation and the need to repossess life, for example, as if life is the continuous rewriting of one's curriculum vitae. This suggests that the bourgeoisie, in part, express the life-affirming instinct of modernity everywhere by constantly inventing new ways of demonstrating one's self-worth to and for oneself and others, new gestures offering proof that we are not worthless in a world deserted by the assurance of salvation.

Thus, despite its historical associations with frugality and the expulsion of pleasure, asceticism animated by the desire of rigour is driven by the need and desire to be recognized as mastering the enjoyment of self-renunciation in an exemplary way, as one-of-a-kind, and so, as demonstrations or proofs of enjoyment in its guise as self-containment. What must then materialize is this tension inherent in the calculation of pleasure and it is the bourgeoisie of each generation that orchestrate this dialectical relation to the pleasure of productivity and the productivity of pleasure through the opportunity to question productivity itself. What the bourgeoisie know is that the ascetic displacement of pleasure in the service of the production of worldly accomplishments of enduring value requires for its persistence a continuous gesture affirming the mastery of self-renunciation as a spectacle exemplary for all who would wish to get on in such a world instead of languishing in dissatisfaction (in a way actually analogous to the pre-capitalist traditional resistances that Weber noted). The secret mastered here is that what must be renounced at any cost is the thought of death, and so, that what must be sacrificed is thought itself. That the sacrifice of thinking meaning is the cost life extracts makes this sacrifice the sign of good citizenship and its discipline and management a means of attaining pleasure.

Here, Weber concedes Marx's insight on the revolutionary character of the bourgeoisie, adding that this spiritual drive is reflected in their will to confront asceticism with the demands of emancipation in the service of constantly changing conceptions of pleasure. The bourgeoisie are particularly innovative with respect to pleasure, its creation and expansion, its social organization and its dissemination. Weber's (1930) important recognition is that the productive life, fraught with anxiety because of the indeterminacy of the question of

self-worth exacerbated by the withdrawal of the assurance of salvation, produces in its own way a dramatic sense of 'inner isolation' as 'a feeling of unprecedented inner loneliness of the single individual' (p. 108). In this process, the risk of passion (living with the ambiguity of our commitments) is reconfigured by our readiness to freely will a methodical approach to the world so as to secure our place in ways undisturbed by the anxiety released through irresolute reflective conundrums. Inner loneliness as such is nothing other than the need to live life according to the death drive, to take pleasure in the unpleasure of 'having' to live as an imperative to follow, to suffer and to enjoy. Reflection redefines passion as the rigorous self-maintaining resolve required in any ambiguous situation. For example, today the notion of a career as an administrative project rather than vocation, and of the curriculum vitae as a constantly revised text as a prideful emblem of demonstrable productivity, is only the most prosaic indication of such redefined passion.

Proletariat: Fateful life chances, resistance

When Marx says of the proletariat that they provide the (secret) key to understanding capitalism, he is pointing to their status as a figure for the extinction of desire that must limit the narcissism of life affirmation, though conceptions of 'bare life' (Agamben, 1998; see also Blum, 1982 and 2011b: 125–166) give examples of extraordinary endurance in contrast to the capacity to rekindle life at any moment reflected in the perpetual motion and energetic activity of the bourgeoisie, stand besides the proletariat the compulsive inertia imagined of the living dead and of the ageing, dying, diseased and of the unlucky.

In therapy and education, the affirmation of life must be enforced as an objective for client, patient, student, that has to lead to the celebration of dialogue itself as the image of salvation that can rescue the subject from mortal destiny. That the belief in dialogue is equivalent to the belief in the affirmation of life must confirm any instance of resistance as morbid, that is, as defensive or uncooperative towards this common project. If analogues to such resistance show in silence, withdrawal and the apathy of indolence and resignation, it can also be registered in resentment, cynicism and the wordlessness that Baudrillard (1983) caricatured as the mass. In this sense, if death is always present in life as the interlocutor to the affirmative spirit of the drive to live in the shadow of its inevitability, as a reminder that this drive is a 'detour' always haunted by the unspoken aura of life as if returning the look that knows the common fate, that knows the subject's detour is not immune to the path ahead, then the struggle to redeem conversation is part of the revolutionary impulse of the bourgeoisie. Understood thusly, revolutionizing the mass, the client, patient, student or whatever, amounts to revitalizing life affirmation always under the shadow of the sneer and the taunt or, more strongly, the silence that haunts life. The detour itself invites this silence to punctuate and penetrate verbosity in ways that can only distinguish the volubility of the bourgeoisie from reflective speech (as we are trying so hard to do here for death and its place in life).

The modernization of enlightenment

The sociological approach suggests that whether or not a reflection upon death is part of a thoughtful life is revealed less through fixation upon the meaning, content or significance of death per se, but to the ways in which representations of death are managed, handled or

negotiated in collective life. What I call modernization of enlightenment serves to rescue theorizing from an impossible engagement with ambiguity in a gesture of renunciation that will still have costs. Note Stanley Cavell's (1988: 30) formulation of Kant:

You can take these paragraphs as constituting the whole argument of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, in four or five lines: (1) Experience is constituted by appearances. (2) Appearances are of something else, which cannot itself appear. (3) All and only functions of experience can be known; these are our categories of the understanding. (4) It follows that the something else – that of which appearances are appearances, whose existence we must grant – cannot be known ... (5) Moreover, since it is unavoidable for our reason to be drawn to think about this unknowable ground of appearance, reason reveals itself to itself in this necessity also.

If practical thinking elects to forgo this 'something else' as unknowable, it still recoups its strength through such a limitation. Although we are frequently 'drawn' to think about this 'unknowable ground of appearance', and so, must struggle with such a temptation (in a way that is passionate), to give in is impetuous, inviting us to understand our best interests to lie in our power to *will* our freedom from such a 'necessity' in order to escape from the inevitability of such temptation (and all of its 'imaginary' convolutions and antinomies).

In this sense, the imaginative structure of the Enlightenment includes renunciation insofar as, in the way of Kant, it accepts the idea that we can at best know only appearances but not the in-itself, making the desire for the in-itself *under such conditions* impetuous and self-destructive. In this way, the enlightened affirmation of freedom that Kant celebrates is ascetic at its core, a gesture that must renounce passionate striving for the in-itself, the desire to express the 'inexpressible', on the ground that such renunciation is a primary expression of our freedom (we *could* after all remain superstitious, freely allowing ourselves to be determined by false idols, in submitting to the charm of being driven in such ways.)

If the secret known by the bourgeoisie as I have discussed is the mastery of self-management reflected in the renunciation of thinking the limits, this secret is not simply a fragment of 'know-how' but backed up and justified by a notion of public spiritedness that not only makes it a commitment good in itself but treats its denial as evil. This commitment can be first grasped in a rudimentary way in the idea of the necessity of being practical not in the sense of mercenary, utilitarian, hard-hearted but as concerns attentive to practical situations in life that seem relatively intractable, much as in the Confucian notion of practicality as a willingness to 'let it be'.

Here, the practical actor is formulated not simply as a business person but as one who is attentive and disciplined towards sustaining and maintaining the body and presumably life, not out of an interest in survival as an end in itself, but as means for furthering other aims. If such care and circumspection (in Heidegger's lingo) is good, its contrast, whether viewed as romantic, self-indulgent or capricious, is condemned.

David Bates (2001) captures dramatically the political implications of the ban on ambiguity among enlightenment thinkers, who were simultaneously aware of the 'truth' of ambiguity as such and at the same time oriented to the need to disavow it in practice:

There was then no doubt that any exploration of the unknown was still a radical risk. Hobbes actually explained why with great clarity. Truth and falsity, he said, are in speech alone, in human forms of knowledge. We can try to eliminate falsity by seeking out the irrational or

incoherent connections within our own thought. But we should remember, he said, that these human truths purged of ambiguity were only contingent certainties, because we can never be entirely sure what we might encounter in the future. ... Similarly in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract*, the body of citizens may fail to find the sublime truth of the general will in its laws; however the one who actively disrupts the established order, the one who willingly breaks the law, must be put to death (or exiled).

(p. 8)

In other words, error is endemic; the Grey Zone is inescapable because of the omnipresence of ambiguity (See Locke, 1690). Such knowledge enjoins us to forfeit as the wrong way, as a criminal or antisocial path, what cannot be limited or determined. Bates (2001) describes how Turgot, the abbe Sieyes and others condemned 'metaphorical straying' as antisocial by distinguishing between the 'normal' human fallibility of the citizen and the oriented pursuit of meaning by the criminal: 'So for Robespierre, the errancy of the patriot had to be distinguished from the criminal deviation of the enemy', marking a difference between error and crime that could convert the error of fallibility into the virtue of 'being practical' in contrast to the resistance shown (p. 18). Note that this distinction between the right and wrong path, error and crime, and citizen and criminal differs from the decisive fork in the road enunciated by Parmenides as the contrast to the way of seeming and the way of becoming, or Heraclitus' being all ears and attuned to the logos in contrast to being a sleep-walker: in the modernization of this fork in the road, the one who is on the wrong road travels knowingly out of a belief that it is necessary and desirable for life.

Conclusion

The undiscussed engagement with the question of mortality and the relationship to death in life is recovered through a reading of the classics of sociology – Durkheim, Marx, Simmel and Weber – and the works of Freud and Lacan, to dramatize the relationship of such a concern to the imaginary of perpetual happiness idealized by the bourgeoisie of each generation and exemplified as the 'problem' of the city.² If engaging mortality is conceived as an example of the thinking of limits, it is proposed that this ban parallels disavowing the question of meaning that the bourgeoisie have cultivated and perfected in the name of practical thinking. In this way, the bourgeoisie can be said to have mastered the secret of life and the connection between mental hygiene and intellectual parsimony celebrated by Kant as the advance of enlightenment. In this sense, the conditions of citizenship in the city are said to require a systemic disregard of such 'deep' concerns on Kantian grounds that their inaccessibility and irresolute character can only distract circumspection from its limited goals. Yet, the imaginary relationship in life cannot be extinguished, making the relationship to the unknown, its ambiguity and remainder, intractable and fertile, occasioning the range of situations we study and inhabit. If the bourgeoisie are correct that a phobic preoccupation with death is distracting to life just as a phobic and phallic obsession with meaning destroys the poetry of thought, we know that forgetting death, like forgetting meaning, is complex enough to require not an either-or relationship but the forgetting that is capable of remembering what it lays aside, not amnesia, disavowal or repression, but something akin to the absolute humour that

Baudelaire (1972) describes as acting as if it is ignorant of what it really knows. Although I have not discussed Simmel's marginalization during his life in any way here, I have hinted ever-so slightly that his solution to the anxiety of death and to the anxiety of ultimate meaning should begin to make reference to the price he might have paid for this and to this debt that we will work to redeem for him now and in the future.

Notes

1. The relation of life to death, or the question of how life and the living should handle death, was given primordial expression as a 'problem' in the discourses of Stoicism and Epicureanism in classical Greece.
2. It might be suggested that the conditions affecting death and its representation today have changed because of the influences of biomedicine, but I have suggested that this seems simply an extension of the foreclosure of meaning of the bourgeoisie and its molecular idealism that hopes to outwit mortality (Blum, 2012, 2013a).

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