

Too Much Culture, Too Little Meaning: How Simmel's Tragedy Sets the Stage for Habermas's Colonization

Akshat Sharma¹, Prof. Dr. Vijay Kumar²

¹Master's Student, Sociology, BSNV PG College affiliated to University of Lucknow

²Professor, Sociology, BSNV PG College affiliated to University of Lucknow

ABSTRACT

This article integrates George Simmel's concept of the *tragedy of culture* with Jürgen Habermas's thesis of the *colonization of the lifeworld* to diagnose a recursive dynamic and late modernity. Simmel identifies a structural axis of objective culture that individuals cannot subjectively assimilate, producing cultural alienation. Habermas argues that systematic media-money and administrative power-colonize communicative domains, displacing understanding with instrumental rationality. I contend that these processes are mutually reinforcing: cultural overload generates demand for systematic management, while system-led interventions proliferate further objective culture. The mechanisms is examined through contemporary socialization, where competing normative scripts for personhood overwhelm actors and elicit marketized and bureaucratic solutions, from life coaching to compliance-based empathy training. An example from urban Indian context demonstrates the acceleration of this loop as intergenerational, therapeutic, and digital pedagogies collide, yielding 'parenting guilt inflation' and metricized intimacy. The article concludes that interrupting the cycle requires coupling Simmelian practices of selective cultivation with Habermasian strategies to defend communicative spheres from systematic imperatives, thereby re-centering unquantified social interaction as a condition of meaningful personhood.

KEYWORDS: Tragedy of Culture, Colonization of Lifeworld, Socialization, Communicative action.

INTRODUCTION

Last night I almost spent 40 minutes choosing what to watch, watched nothing, and felt guilty about it. My phone then suggested a productivity course to 'optimize my leisure time'. That's the 21st century in miniature: too much culture to meaningfully engage with, so we let systems manage the engagement for us. A century apart, George Simmel called the first half of this problem the *tragedy of culture*; Jürgen Habermas named the second-half *the colonization of the lifeworld*. Alone, each explains modern alienation. Together, they reveal a feedback loop: cultural overload creates the anxiety that systematic control promises to solve, while producing even more cultural to drown in. Two of sociology's most enduring diagnosis of modernity seemed to describe different pathologies. For George Simmel, the *tragedy*

of culture emerges when objective culture - the totality of human creations – expands beyond any individual’s capacity for subjective cultivation. For Jürgen Habermas, the *colonization of the lifeworld* occurs when the steering media of money and power invade domains of social life that depend upon communicative understanding. This article argues the two processes are sequential and reinforcing : the tragic excess of culture generates the very meaning-deficit that systematic colonization claims to manage , accelerating the production of still more objective culture.

MAIN THEME

We are not just overwhelmed by culture, we now pay systems to manage our overwhelm, and that payment costs us meaning.

For Simmel, modernity’s tragedy is built into culture itself : the more we create to express life, the less any one life can absorb those creations. He split culture into two parts.

Objective culture is the total stockpile of human objects- art, science, tech, games- that take on their own logic once made. Subjective culture is our personal cultivation, the way we internalize those objects to grow. Modern societies produce far more objective culture than any person can master. Differentiation and the money economy accelerate output, while individual capacity lags. The result is fragmentation: we live surrounded by a culture and feel uncultured. That mismatch is the tragedy. Simmel saw it as inevitable because culture must objectify to exist, yet objectification guarantees it will outrun us.

But Simmel’s tragedy doesn’t end with overload. When culture outruns us, something else steps into the vacuum. Habermas calls that something the “system”.

Habermas identifies a second blow: Once culture outruns us, the system of money and bureaucracy colonizes the spaces where we used to make sense of it together. He divides society into lifeworld and system. The lifeworld is everyday life reproduced through communicative action- talking, understanding, consensus. The system is economy and state, run by steering media: money and power. Colonization happens when those media invade areas that need understanding to function- family , education, leisure. Systematic mechanisms then “suppress forms of social integration” where symbolic reproduction is at stake , and mediatization “assumes the form of a colonization”. We see it when hobbies get Key Performance Indicators, when algorithms curate taste, when school becomes bureaucratic procedure. The lifeworld doesn't disappear. It gets managed.

So far these look like two separate crises :one of access , one of invasion. But in practice, they feed each other. Socialization shows how.

Consider socialization- the process by which we learn to be persons. Simmel’s tragedy hits first: there are now 10,000 scripts for being human. Parenting has gentle parenting, Regional Institutes of Education, authoritative, Montessori, free-range, tiger, helicopter, and 30 more , each with books and influencers. Work as unread etiquette codes for Slack, Zoom, e-mail, LinkedIn. Dating has infinite “rules” on TikTok: texting frequency, attachment styles, green flags ,beige flags. Identity itself multiplies into aesthetic tribes, micro-labels, and performance checklists. No one can subjectively master this objective culture of personhood. The sheer mass of norms turns growing up into ambient guilt. You cannot keep up, so cultivation- practical wisdom, character, ease with others- stalls. Young adults report feeling ‘behind at life’ not from lack of options, but from excess. Culture meant to help us become ourselves now prevents it.

That anxiety is where Habermas's colonization moves in. Systems promise to manage the excess. Money appears as life coaches at Rs15,000 per hour, "masculinity" masterminds and "personal branding" consultants who teach you to human like a startup. Bureaucratic power appears as HR onboarding that trains "corporate culture" via compliance modules; schools Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curricula that grade empathy on rubric; dating apps that enforce "healthy communication" with automated warnings. Parenting apps score your tone. Workplace tools give you a "communication score" after meetings. Social media platforms write terms of service that script acceptable personality. Socialization stops being communicative- stories from elders, arguments with friends, trial-and-error in real communities- and becomes instrumental: policy adherence, engagement scores, "toxicity free" badges, certificates in being a good person.

The Indian Context: When Joint Families Meet Instagram Therapy

In India, from my perspective and empirical knowledge, the loop growing is faster because traditional and modern scripts collide in one generation. Take parenting for instance. The objective culture of "How to raise a child" now includes dadi-nani wisdom, pediatrician, Sanskrit shlokas, Korean attachment theory, Instagram Therapists, and EdTech apps- all at once. A neophyte mother in Lucknow is told by elders to oil the baby's head daily, by her doctor to track milestones on an app, and by a social media reel to "respect the child's autonomy" before age two. Simmel's tragedy: No one can subjectively reconcile these forms. The result is not confidence but "parenting guilt inflation".

Then enters colonization. Because the overload is painful, systems sell solutions. Money: 2000/- parenting webinars, 5000/- per month "gentle parenting" coaches, Byju's-style apps that gamify a three-year old's learning. Power: schools send home SEL worksheets graded on "emotional regulations"; housing societies run bureaucratic "good parent" workshops; matrimonial sites add "therapy verified" badges. Even joint-family advice gets

bureaucratized into WhatsApp forwards with numbered rules. The lifeworld space of raising kids- once negotiated through talk across generations- is now mediated by subscriptions and PDFs.

Relationships show the same pattern. Urban India now juggles arranged marriage logics, dating app logics, situation ship logics, and neo-traditional "woke sanskar" logics.

Objective culture gives you 100 scripts for love. The anxiety triggers colonization: paid matchmakers who use psychometric tests, relationship managers on apps, premarital counseling certificates mandated by some communities and Instagram therapists who monetize attachment theory. Communication between partners risks becoming KPI-driven: "We had our weekly check-in; score 7/10 on vulnerability".

Then the loop closes. To feed those systems, experts and platforms ship more objective culture: new frameworks, micro-etiquettes, updated identity checklists, annual revisions to HR training and manuals. More scripts, more overwhelm, more demand for Systems to certify us as socially competent. The tragedy creates the market that colonization monetizes, and colonization scales the tragedy. Result: infinite advice on being human, but we feel less sure how to live. Kids ask ChatGPT how to make friends. Couples run sentiment analysis on their texts to see if they're compatible.

If tragedy creates the demand and colonization supplies it, then breaking the cycle means refusing

both: we need new ways to be selective and new places to talk.

CONCLUSION

Simmel asks us to choose selectively, to form new subjective practices that make culture ours again. That might mean explicit “norm sabbaths” – Family dinners with no parenting gurus quoted, dates with no apps open. Habermas asks us to speak collectively, to defend communicative spaces where money and power don't set the rules of personhood. That means funding public parks, not just malls; protecting mohalla, adda and nukkad discussions; keeping bureaucracy out of friendships. Escaping the loop means sparing personal boundaries with political reclamation of the lifeworld. It means treating “unmeasured social time” as infrastructure, not inefficiency. We need rooms where being awkward is allowed, because socialization without risk isn't socialization at all.

Simmel saw culture outrun life. Habermas saw systems step into the gap. Today, the gap is where we live. We collect scripts faster than we can become anyone and we hire systems to decide which script counts. The systems then print more. Perhaps the point is not to solve the loop but to notice where it is thinnest. A conversation with no metric. A choice made without consulting the archive of options. Socialization happens there, still. It always did. Simmel's thought culture's tragedy was inevitable. Habermas thought colonization was reversible. Maybe our job is to prove they were both half right. We aren't just drowning in culture, in the scripts for being human. We are not only drowning in ways to be human. We are subscribed to the service that writes new ones each month, that holds our heads underwater. We are forgetting how to be human without a manual. The work is remembering.

REFERENCES

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