



# Simmel, the Emotions and the Tragic Nature of the Love Bond

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## Article abstract

*The aim of this essay is to analyze the sociological study of emotions produced by Georg Simmel, with specific attention to the concept of love. The article is structured as follows: in the first part, what could be defined as 'Simmel's sociology of emotions' is presented through a descriptive and interpretative analysis of the constructed social theory; in the second part, the focus shifts to love as emotion, emphasizing its tragic character within the construction and destruction of the social bond. Finally, in the third part, a comparison with the sociological analysis of love produced by two contemporary researchers such as Eva Illouz – love as a result of the dynamics conveyed by 'emotional capitalism' – and Danilo Martuccelli – love as an 'emotional imperative' of contemporary daily life - will be produced. The common thread of the entire essay is exactly the tragic character of the emotion of love, which allows both the construction and the destruction of the social bond, through an ambivalent interactional game that seems to have no end.*

MASSIMO CERULO

## *Simmel, the Emotions and the Tragic Nature of the Love Bond*

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### **1. Introduction: Simmel, the emotions and the metropolitan life**

In Simmel's sociology, the attention to emotional expressiveness and to the feelings of people who live and act in modernity is present in numerous writings (cf. Pyyhtinen, 2017; Fitz, 2019), although a semantic distinction between the terms emotion and feeling is not produced (cf. Simmel, 1917-19, 1909a, 1908).

First of all, for Simmel, there are not modern individuals who do not 'feel', who do not perceive emotions in the course of their social

interactions. Like rain and sunshine, emotions and feelings ‘fall’ on the individual, but the individual can choose how to use them (Simmel, 1908)<sup>1</sup>.

Understanding social phenomena is therefore possible if it is adequately taken into account the role played by emotions in the interactions of individuals, the way they feel, relate to each other and create forms of sociality (cf. Nedelmann, 1988; Cerulo, 2019).

In his early works and then, in particular, in his major work, *Sociology* (1908), Simmel points repeatedly out how the advent of modernity, the so-called ‘metropolitan life’ that he also calls the ‘age of money’ (cf. Gallo Lassere, 2016), has erased the ‘ancient’ ways of manifesting emotions to open to modern intellectualism that stands as the dominant force in the management of most individual actions (Gerhards, 1986). One of the main characteristics of modern everyday life is an ‘intensification of nervous life’ privileging, in everyday actions, the use of the intellect (*Verstand*) – the more superficial faculty of the psyche, with its logical-combinatory character that allows individuals to manage multiple activities even simultaneously – rather than reason (*Vernunft*) – that faculty of consciousness that gives the individual the possibility of reflecting on the world giving it a meaning, and which therefore implies a confrontation with the emotions experienced.

The experience of everyday life in the metropolitan city well encompasses these two characteristics:

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<sup>1</sup> On the point, please consider the example of pity, an emotion that allows the individuals to come into contact with the religious sphere – pity is religiosity still in its fluid state (Simmel, 1906b) – and consequently, with their individual interiority as a believing and, social being.

The intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli [...] is the most adaptable of our inner forces. In order to adjust to the shifts and contradictions in events, it is not required the disturbances and inner upheavals which are the only means whereby more conservative personalities are able to adapt themselves to the same rhythm of events [...] Instead of reacting emotionally, the metropolitan type reacts primarily in a rational manner, thus creating a mental predominance through the intensification of consciousness, which in turn is caused by it. Thus, the reaction of the metropolitan person to those events is moved to a sphere of mental activity which is least sensitive and which is furthest removed from the depths of the personality (Simmel, 2010 [1903]: 104).

Simmel hypothesises that the inhabitants of the metropolis<sup>2</sup> become like ‘grains of dust’ (*Staubkorn*), overwhelmed by the bombardment of stimuli, commitments and information stimulated by modernity that could affect their ability to deepen interactions, to be moved, to ‘feel’ (Simmel, 1903). What could be defined as the ‘intellectualism’ of consciousness, combined with the characteristics of the monetary economy, leads to the birth of the so-called ‘blasé man’, whose essence consists of a general attenuation of sensitivity with respect to people and things as well as a difficulty in deepening of his/her own and others’ emotions (cf. Sabido Ramos, 2020). Being blasé is therefore a necessary defensive attitude through which the modern individual protects his/her capacity for reflection and emotionality from the voracious omnipresence of stimuli, information and routines that characterise his/her everyday life (Nedelmann, 1999: 142).

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<sup>2</sup> In general, today we could affirm that this theory is true for most of the inhabitants of the Western world, regardless of the cities in which they live, in the light of the communication networks allowed by digital media (Cit. Rafele, 2013).

How are emotions influenced by these tendencies? According to Simmel, emotions and reason form an inseparable union that represents the core of the (modern) individual, who finds in him/herself the criteria for judgment, evaluation and motivation to act. However, although they are an integral part of the individual (since they are born within him/her and characterise him/her, making each person unique, different from the others), in their manifestation they take on aspects that go beyond the singularity of the individual, thus becoming social phenomena: they in turn produce social interactions.

In this analysis, however, it is important to make clear that emotions play an ambivalent role in modernity: they are both a means of communication and identification with others, and an instrument of self-understanding and thus of personal identification. They are elementary forms of sociality, bridges between the individual and society, because although the latter is certainly based on certain socio-structural assumptions, it could not take root in individuals without relying on feelings, beliefs, imaginary representations, desires and aspirations (Watier, 2002).

## **2. Ambivalence of modernity and emotions**

In this two-way relationship between individual and society, there is emotional ambivalence. For instance, today there are very few people with whom one can claim to have an in-depth and continuous acquaintance, even though one is immersed in a plurality of daily interactions, especially within the professional sphere. This loneliness is ambivalent because, on one hand, the risk is to instil in the individual a sort of 'schizophrenic' behaviour (emotions of happiness and nervousness that continuously alternate) due to the uninterrupted emotional stimuli suffered by an increasingly frenetic and technological metropolitan life and aimed

at professional competition. On the other hand, however, it allows him/her to seek out countless experiences and emotional interactions, regardless of family rules, neighbourhood, class, etc. People, therefore, choose to follow one path among a thousand possible ones, and this tension, this wealth of possibilities, paints modern existence with an irresistible fascination:

The fascination that innumerable life experiences exert on us [is determined] in its intensity by the fact that through them we leave unexplored infinite possibilities of other enjoyments and opportunities to affirm ourselves. It is not only in the passing by of men, in their separation after a brief contact, in the complete estrangement from countless beings, to whom we could give, who could give us so much; in all this there is not only a sumptuous waste, a heedless grandeur of existence. This specific value of non-enjoyment also gives rise to a new, more intense and more concentrated fascination with what we actually possess. The fact that it is precisely this that is realised among the many possibilities of life gives it a tone of victory, the shadows of life's unexpressed and unenjoyed wealth form its triumphal procession (Simmel, 1978 [1900]: 210).

Immersed in this ambivalent existential and emotional dimension, the inhabitants of modernity, in order to keep up with the fast pace imposed by metropolitan experience, act or, better, react mainly through the use of the intellect. Thus, they try to protect what Simmel calls 'sentimentality' from the acceleration of experience, the excess of stimuli and the continuous change imposed by the modern era. We are therefore faced with a strategic manifestation of emotions selected on the basis of the demands of the social context in which we act in our everyday life, and the objectives to be pursued. This is not a denial of emotions, but a display of those ones most suitable to the social situation in which one finds oneself. Thus, in normal daily interactions, fleeting,

momentary, ‘impressionistic’ expressions and emotional behaviour are increasingly taking shape.

The ambivalence of modernity, this being made up of trends and counter-trends, forces people to live an essentially tragic relationship, caught in what Simmel calls the ‘dualism of individuality’: being for oneself and being social (Simmel, 1908). On one hand, the modern individual tends to withdraw into self, in search of new spaces of individualisation and reflexivity; on the other hand, he/she cannot help feeling the social call that characterises him/her as belonging to a life in common with others. Existential ambivalence becomes in Simmel a principle of socialisation, a modern vehicle through which to grasp the facets of social reality.

This ambivalence also characterises the manifestation of emotions and represents a kind of social energy that guarantees the ego vital impetus: it is a dual instrument of knowledge in that it is directed towards oneself and, symmetrically, towards the other. Thus, although they emerge as conflicting forces and potential creators of tension in social interaction and, consequently, in the choice that the individual has to make about their manifestation, emotions are always elementary forms of sociality: on one hand, they help to create social interactions; on the other, they also arouse emotions.

Simmel studies various forms of emotional-sentimental social interaction: sociability, discretion, modesty, shame, gratitude, loyalty, confidence, friendship, marriage, flirt, love (cf. Cerulo, Rafele, 2022). These emotions always play a dual role: on the one hand, they allow people to enter society, build social interactions, gain experience; on the other, they allow him/her to discover him/herself, identify his/her own feelings in the relations with

others<sup>3</sup>. Within this melting pot of emotions, we will now see what role love plays.

### 3. Love: a modern experience?

Love plays a major role in the sociology of emotions of Simmel. The reference is, in particular, to the article, posthumously published in the 1984: *On love (a fragment)*<sup>4</sup>.

According to Simmel, love is configured as a free, direct and purposeless interaction, rather untied from any utilitarian relationship and far from the instrumental reason characteristic of modern society. It is also characterised by a constitutive ambivalence: on one hand, having freed itself from the family sphere, which was previously its main environment of manifestation, it finds a freedom of expression that gives to the individual the possibility of living multiple experiences; on the other hand, due to the considerable increase of the modern social differentiation, the love relationship becomes essentially tragic and

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<sup>3</sup> Among the many examples, think of that of the flirt-coquetry (Koketterie), which is a form of play that becomes a general form of interaction (Simmel, 1909a). Studying the ‘flirtatious’ behaviour of the subjects (starting with the coquetry typical of early 20th century upper-class women during the courtship process: their granting and denying themselves, embracing an invitation and immediately retreating to their positions), Simmel highlights how, through such a form of playful interaction, one can arrive at a thematization of social reality in a more convincing and profound way than in normal everyday interactions, marked by the respect of institutional and social rules that leave little room for imagination and facetiousness. In flirt, subjects must trust their emotions, as a compass to orient themselves within a playful, intimate relationship, ostensibly directed towards the other but, at bottom, an instrument of personal identification.

<sup>4</sup> Originally part of: Simmel G. (1923). *Fragmente und Aufsätze aus dem Nachlass*. München: Drei Masken Verlag.



individual: it only ignites in the face of individuality and shatters in the face of its insuperability (Simmel, 1923; Seebach, 2017).

According to Simmel, love is configured as directly linked to existence: it is a personal and subjective feeling, which can appear with different shades and different languages, which can express itself in multiple forms and in particular contexts. This is precisely possible in relation to the life from which love originates and, from the individual and collective events that occur, it can undergo exaltation or degradation. Such a feeling then finds a particular accord with the modern era, due to its being based on

the free choice of different and differentiated individuals: it is the typical social differentiation of modernity that allows individuals who are different from each other, disconnected from the traditional relationships of family and class, to choose each other. In other words, to discover, recognize and respect each other as bearers of rights and generators of desires. In these terms, love allows the expansion that is direct result of the modern (and metropolitan, as clarified in the previous paragraph) society.

Simmel's individuals, therefore, forced to come to terms with their ineliminable solitude which is constitutive of the experience of modernity, are in search of some form of certainties that give solidity to their ego. This does not mean that the individual is inconsistent, since in any case he/she holds and retains his/her personal core that characterizes him/her as unique and different from others. But the search for solidity is a trend that specifically characterizes the modern era, in which a person is subjected to a series of tendencies and counter-trends that represent forms of existential ambivalence. In this sense, the love interaction becomes solid for the subject, for his constant search for individuality through the other, a tendency that makes people, once again, ambivalent in their actions: on one hand, they tend to shy away from

the responsibilities that dyadic experience brings with it; on the other, they feel the need to live in a continual search for the other and to experience different experiences with the latter. They are caught between unity and multiplicity. Between the desire to 'dare' with the other and the fear of no longer finding themselves. Love is thus caught in this grip of contradiction and seeks its way of realization through an alternation of confirmations and disappointments of one's expectations on the other person and on one's self. These forms of ambivalence or expressions of the aforementioned 'dualism of individuality', on the one hand, are configured as structural elements or poles of the individual, who feeds on this tension to proceed along a path of existential growth; on the other hand, they are partially influenced by the characteristics of a specific historical period. According to Simmel, in the case of modernity this dualism could configure contradictory tendencies instead of constitutive oppositions of individual life, to the point of making a subject loose existential points of reference.

It is therefore not surprising that, especially in modernity, love is configured as a totalising emotion, which produces a shattering experience for the individual in his/her entirety (also because in love interaction individuals give themselves to the other in their entirety, unlike other forms of interaction in which only a part of one's self is brought into play). This is because love always brings together two wholes: two individuals who reveal themselves to each other, for what they are and not only for that part of themselves that they want or need to show.

Simmel often returns to this discourse of unity, the pivotal point of his 'sociology of love' (cf. Simmel, 1923). He sees love as a revolutionary force capable of creating havoc and disorder in existing reality, but at the same time able of transforming the individuals, reshaping their relationships, thus creating a new order and, in the end, a new social reality that can only be used by people involved in the interaction. In fact, through the experience of love,

they create their own 'love landscape'. The other becomes the loved one: he/she transforms him/herself into a landscape and, at the same time, creates his/her own landscape each time (cf. Simmel, 1913). So, according to Simmel, the loved one is never seen objectively since his/her image takes shape together with love, and, more precisely, the one who loves would not be able to say whether the transformation of the image has provoked love, or love has provoked this transformation. Thus, taken by the love relationship, while looking for space for themselves, people break down rules, habits, traditions. It is in this sense that love is configured as a disintegrating force, not because it is destructive, but because it is an energy that is first and foremost the creation of two new people, two new individuals that give the world a new meaning which is founded on their own subjectivity, on their own vivified and reunified experience, no longer divided and fragmented.

This experience of love thus becomes a sort of experiential bridge: through it one is driven to act, to be active in the world and not to close it off from oneself.

One feels, indeed, consistent: it seems to grasp the meaning of existence challenging the reality and its established order because finally one has the feeling - in the company of the loved one - to fully understand it. In this sense, love as self-perception is closely linked to the process of personal identification. Through this openness to the world, the individual has the opportunity to interact with the other and, through the love relationship, to embark on an introspective path. In fact, according to Simmel, love creates its own love object. When *Ego* loves *Alter*, although turning to another person, actually turns the love towards him/herself. *Alter* would then be the object through which it is ultimately possible to love oneself. It is a mirror-love made, anyway, possible only by the presence of another person within the love-interaction (Simmel, 1923). According to Simmel, love is a search, a possibility, a

continuous becoming. One looks for the other person in oneself, in one's feeling, in a continuous creative activity. This search is called love. But it is crucial to underline that such a love, for the German sociologist, is an «undeniable and quite distinctively human fact», as dependable from the specific dual relationship between Ego and Alter: a relation, then, which has not to be given for granted but to be analyzed identifying the specific traits of the main characters involved into the interaction: «Other feelings, no matter how much they may tie person to person, have yet something more solipsistic. After all, even love [...] essentially occurs and endures in the individual himself, immanently as is perhaps revealed most strikingly in Philine's question: 'In what way does it concern you that I love you?'. In spite of its extraordinary sociological significance, this feeling remains, above all, subjective state» (Simmel, 2009 [1908]: 352).

In a love relationship, however, the individual is forced to live tragically, caught between the desire for extraneousness and the need to relate to the other. Oscillating within the modern process of social differentiation, it is always member and body, part and whole, completed and in need of completion (Simmel, 1917-1919). *Ego* needs *Alter* because it is only through its presence that it is able to experience love. It is thanks to the 'contamination' with the other that it is possible to look at oneself from another perspective and go deep into the relationship with oneself. Therefore love, in becoming concrete, in its becoming life, is necessarily contamination of two individualities: the individual with the world, the individual with the other. And, in turn, it produces contamination and conflict. Yet, because of the characteristics of modernity, love is marked by conflicts: between the different parts of the self, between individual and society and, above all, between the individual and the other, bound by an interaction suspended between intimacy and solitude, between indiscretion and discretion, between the desire to become a *W<sub>e</sub>* and the need to remain separate *You* and *Me*. If indiscretion allows the individual to enter into a

relationship, it is then necessary to use that ‘feeling of touch’ (*Taktfühl*) to avoid breaking the boundaries of otherness. To try not to overflow into the sacred enclosure of the individual conscience. Notwithstanding that, as Simmel writes, in the other there is always something unattainable that causes an invisible wall between the two individuals, impossible to break down even by the most passionate will (Simmel, 1923). It is that secret of the individuality of the individual to be protected at all costs (cf. Dufourmantelle, 2019). The inhabitants of modernity could not tolerate canceling their subjectivism into ‘another’ identity, opening their conscience, their inner sanctuary, to continuous indiscretion.

Therefore, love is configured as the most intense and most painful experience of the irreducible loneliness of the human condition. Any attempt to cancel it through the union of two individualities is doomed to failure because the loneliness of the human being cannot be eliminated and makes love assume a false, inauthentic character. Also because, for Simmel, solitude is synonymous with freedom, but still directly linked to relationality, a constitutive experience of the individual: freedom is a sociological experience, that is relational, right because the human being includes in her/himself those spiritual-vital dualisms that represent the core of the subject: individuality and relationality, affinity and distance, bond and autonomy.

Thus, modernity seems to appear as a gentle conspirator, careful to guarantee the polymorphism of reality as well as to preserve otherness and extraneousness which attract the individuals who ‘undertake’ a relationship. Like the wave of the sea that laps and then recedes, these modern forms of sociality described by Simmel display the characteristics of transience and fleetingness, in a relationship made up of secrets, fantasies and *Ego-Alter* games, in which the ambivalence of emotions and their manifestations plays a major role (cf. Simmel, 1906a). Simmel's experience of modernity

thus takes on the traits of an adventure, that is, of the present open to all of that could be, of the here and now, that oscillates between tendencies and counter-tendencies, ambiguities and contradictions, openness and closure to the outside world. We are dealing with an individual who goes ahead 'by trial and error', aware of the different spheres of reality that make up his emotional experience. Thus, it is not only about two individualities who meet and collide, but about two expectations, two projects that both tend towards their own self-realization. So, love also becomes a form of moral knowledge: its practice allows you to learn new information about yourself, leads a sort of self-disclosure and, at the same time, you have the opportunity to discover your own relationship with the outside world. Love thus acts as an epiphany of the self and at the same time of the world, as the most powerful manifestation of the psychic immanence of the conception of the world (cf. Simmel, 1923).

#### **4. The tragedy of love**

Love is thus meant as a form of social interaction and means of integration in modern societies. Simmel shed light on the emotional-sentimental condition of love as among modernity main forms of social interaction. We have explained how love is characterized by a strong ambivalence. Let's deepen it again: on one hand, the individual is forced to come to terms with his/her unavoidable solitude as directly linked to the fragmentation of work and family life. On the other hand, such a solitude allows people to venture into unexplored paths and research for countless experiences.

One key point of Simmel's theory of love is the idea according to which, although emotions are integral part of the individual, in their manifestation, they take up features which go beyond the

singularity of the individual, thus becoming social phenomena<sup>5</sup>. They are indeed the result of social interactions and social constructions enacted by the people belonging to a given culture. In other words, the crucial point of Simmel's sociology of emotions is that they are a constitutive element of the individual together with the rational element. Emotions and reason form a strong bond accounting for the nucleus of the modern individual. Such a perspective is fruitfully applied by the German sociologist also to the love. We have explained how love is mainly a form of interaction. Through the study of love experiences it is possible to discover a lot on the individual's habits and on the society he/she inhabits. Simmel claims love to be mainly a free interaction: such a form of love stands half way between the *amour passion* and sociability. It is not impenetrable to ambivalences, but rather feeds on it. On the one hand, being emancipated from the family realm which was previously its main space of disclosure, love is now so free to express itself that the individual can allow him/herself to live several relations (although he/she has to deal with cultural, religious or political rules in force in that historical-social context). On the other hand, due to the need for another person and the compulsory sharing of one's ego, love relationships become essentially tragic and individual: Simmel mentions an «overtone of the tragic» which adheres to every great love because the pure experience of love is self-contained, an end in itself (Simmel, 1923). In these terms, hence, love is configured as a tragedy among the purest ones, as it ignites only for individuality and breaks against the insuperability of the latter (Simmel, 1923). If, as we have seen, the differentiation and individuality which characterize modernity are necessary for the

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<sup>5</sup> With some differences based on gender, impossible to be analyzed on this occasion. Please refer to: Coser, 1977; Oakes, 1984.

affirmation of love, they also constitute its insurmountable limit. It is of this contradiction that the unsolvable tragic trait of love consists, which suffocates in the fusion of two individualities but dries up in their distance. In such a situation, the person, that, as said, is forced to come to terms with its unavoidable solitude as basic constituent of the experience of modernity, is nevertheless constantly looking for some form of consistency grounding the two-people relationship. It is the focal point of the tension between those that Simmel names bridge and door, that is to say between individualism – the upholder of uniqueness and self-realisation as well as solitude – and vitalism – responsible for multiple intersubjective relations as well as for differentiation and fragmentation (cf. Simmel, 1909b). Love is therefore understood as an openness to the world and to oneself, thus becoming a crucial part of that modern individual mechanism which involves putting oneself to the test, to experiment, to build oneself freely and through an existential loneliness which is made possible thanks to the inevitable relationship with the other (as clarified in the previous paragraph). The individual envisaged by Simmel is a *consistent* individual inasmuch as it has the marks of conflict and multiplicity, it is open to change, to the fatigue of metamorphosis. By consistency here we mean a way to hold things together, however clumsily and unsteadily, within one unique amalgamation which is constantly re-kneaded and re-mixed: « The consistency individual is, then [...] continuously rising, continuously growing and changing around its own inalienable *ubi consistam* » (Turnaturi, 1994: 120, *my transl.*).

Simmel's sociology of emotions takes consistency to be also the constant research for individuality through the other. Once again ambivalence shines through: while the individual tends to escape the responsibilities entailed by any two-people experience, he/she also feels the urge to continuously look for the other and try out different experiences together. According to Simmel, love is a hurricane subverting the whole individual: the totalising experience of one's



own totality, within which the individual acts with ‘sleepwalker safety’ (Simmel, 1911). Only through love the other can be addressed as a whole, differently from utilitarian interactions, as clarified in previous paragraphs, where just a part of oneself is at stake and mainly instrumental rationality is called upon. According to Simmel, love establishes a relationship between two totalities: two individuals reveal themselves to each other for what they ‘truly’ are – according to that feeling of authenticity and of being true to oneself described by Charles Taylor (1991) – and not only for that part that they wish or feel compelled to show.

Simmel often reinforces the reference to unity as the turning point of his philosophy of love. As seen, his idea of love corresponds to a revolutionary power, which is able to subvert and disturb the existing reality. According to Simmel, then, love follows in the steps of individuality, that is to say it is likely to be marked by the unavoidable ambiguity that identifies modern individuals:

All that is called individuality, as a state of being, a sensibility, or as an aspiration, expresses a quality of behaviour irreducible to any more primordial instinct, one that is unknown among non-human animals. On the one hand, it always means relating to a more or less large or smaller world in ways that can be either practical or ideal, negative or affirmative, ruling or subservient, indifferent or passionate; but on the other hand, it also means that individuals comprise a world for themselves and are centred in them-selves, as self-sufficient unitary beings. This double existence disrupts the earthly life of every recognizably ‘single’ reflective being; for on the one hand, all individuals rest within themselves, whether formally or substantively, as unities with a certain intrinsic being, meaning or purpose of their own; but on the other hand, they are parts of one or many wholes that exist outside of them as an encompassing totality towering above them. They are always at once member and body, part and

whole, complete and incomplete. Individuality is what we call the form in which an attempt is made to unify these dual poles of human existence. (Simmel, 1950 [1917-1919]: 67).

In the light of the analysis produced so far, we can therefore underline how, for Simmel, the modern ambivalence of love and, in general, of emotions, is characterized by a series of consistencies but also of ambiguity. The latter are part of that explicit 'tragedy of the love relationship' that is exasperated by an era - modernity - which tends to transform the structural categories of what Simmel defines as spiritual-vital into constitutive dualisms of the individual. In other words, the *social forms* in which it is possible to grasp parts of the subject's existence risk incessantly to overlap *life*, or the inner core of the individual which represents his uniqueness (cf. Wolff, 1950; Frisby, 1985). The risk is that the multiple oppositional tendencies conveyed by modernity tend to eliminate that fundamental, polar tension that concerns the emotional dimension (as well as the other dimensions of the human being - rational, vital, spiritual, etc.) and which is fundamental in that constitutive of the relationality and sociality of each individual.

Simmel's reflections on love do not tend so much to the construction of a theory, but rather analyze and interpret the forms of experience that the modern individual lives through this emotional form of sociality. Simmel writes about love and uses this practice also to talk about a series of characteristics of society: the subject of modernity, the multiplicity of its interactions, the dualism of social being, the tragic hidden in the experience of the metropolis (and of modern culture), the differentiation of modern society. These elements are found, in my opinion, in two recent sociological analyzes on love produced by two well-known contemporary sociologists.

## **5. Eva Illouz: love in capitalist society**

I would like to point to Simmel's general conformity with two very interesting studies both for the sociology of daily life and for that of emotions. Notably, I refer here to the analysis of the sociologists Eva Illouz and Danilo Martuccelli.

We have seen how love, according to Simmel, is opposed to reification, to the reduction of the person to an instrument and object. Love that replaces one's object would be only a semblance that hides other purposes in the love discourse. According to Illouz's analysis, today this vision seems to have been replaced with that conveyed by capitalist society, which has produced the transformation of emotions into commodities, with the market also playing a main role in daily romantic relationships. It fills the cultural void left by the weakening of family and community bonds, to the point of creating a problem as soon as it becomes an end in itself and no other cultural or political force is able to discipline its effects. The market has hence a deciding role in the development of intimate and emotional relationships, favouring the creation of weak bonds within the household, the partners, and the group one belongs to.

Eva Illouz claims that the development of capitalism has gone hand in hand with the development of a highly specialized 'emotional culture' (Illouz, 2007). According to Illouz, the emotional sphere and the intimacy one have progressively 'cooled down', in order to comply to the rules and models of interactions imposed by the rational, efficient, and capitalist market as well as by instrumental reason. In this regard, the author refers to an 'emotional capitalism', referring to a whole culture where emotional and economic discourses and practices are reciprocally modelled on one another, thus producing a wide movement, in which the emotional life follows the rules of economic relations and

exchanges (Cerulo, 2018). The emotional capitalism harnesses emotions to the service of instrumental action. This results in a strong rationalization of sentimental bonds within intimate and private interactions, which could lead to a detachment between the display emotion and the feeling individual. So, intimate relations become ‘functionalised’, meaning that they transform into merchandisable and interchangeable objects on the market of sentimental relations. In other words, Illouz outlines a two-ways relationship between capitalism and emotions: while the market rules tend to shape interpersonal relations, the relations themselves lie at the core of economic interests. Emotions are sold and bought on the market as any other good. In this sense, according to Illouz, emotions shape the emotional habitus of the individual, which, besides being a tool for social classification, affects the forms of happiness and social wellness characterizing each individual. In the logic of emotional capitalism, the more one is able to be rational and strategic in showing his/her own emotions, the higher the chances to progress in one’s careers, in holding power, climbing high up in the social stratification. The author warns about the constant use of instrumental rationality (*Wertrationalität*) in contemporary relations, as the resulting cognitive style is able to take from sentimental relations their specific identity, devaluating and transforming them into objects, which, assessed on the market standard basis, such as equality and needs satisfaction, tend to share the destiny and the soulless existence of exchangeable goods.

Emotions are therefore sold and bought on the market like any other commodity, in a vision of extreme constitutionalism of emotional states that almost eliminates their ‘natural’ part and so their aptitude to suddenly appearing and disappearing, without the individual being able to manage their manifestation: it seems to be faced with a sort of ‘ontology of emotions’, or rather the idea that emotions can be separated from the individual for purposes of clarification and control (Illouz, 2007: 69).

Illouz, however, does not deny the natural presence of emotions within individuals, but theorizes an intellectualization of contemporary intimate bonds, in which love relationship is taken as a symptomatic example (Illouz, 1997, 2011). Love is that emotional state which, if experienced in a personal and ‘authentic’ way, could lead to feelings of suffering, longing and pain when you encounter the otherness of your loved one. These negative emotions, despite being banished from the capitalist culture that conveys imperatives of self-affirmation and efficiency in emotional (and sexual) performance, are consubstantial with the real existence of love – meant as romantic love or *amour passion*, i.e., a relationship between people who feel attraction – as they contribute to the process of defining the identity of the lovers and test their relationship. However, based for example on the communication provided by the capitalist market, which would undermine the authenticity of intimate relationships, the irrational part of the amorous state would be extinguished (or at most postponed) in favor of a deconstruction of sentiment, of a communication rationale of love that many times cannot be possible (cf. Tisseron, 2001).

Illouz thus underlines, taking the sentiment of love as an example, the cultural and immanent contradictions that emotional capitalism exerts on emotions: the model that would characterize the communication of the latter would like to describe and prescribe an inner feeling based on presumed corporate rules that they overflow from the work-professional sphere to the intimate-family one. However, precisely as feeling, we are faced with something that cannot always be controlled or managed at the table, through the use of an instrumental rationality that would have the task of canceling the hot part of emotions, the one that apparently carries irrational passion.

Emotional relationships, including love, are not confined to the ego but are determined and influenced by social relationships:

although they cannot be harnessed in established predictive models and schemes – there is always a degree of unpredictability of emotion and behavior –, they are strongly influenced by the culture of Western capitalism which, as mentioned, tends to consider them as commodities to be exchanged on the daily markets to ‘obtain profit’ (happiness, well-being, satisfaction) and achieve certain objectives. In this sense, Illouz precisely considers emotions as consumer goods and commodities, coming to coin a hybrid term that holds the two meanings together: *emodity* (from the words emotion and commodity). The purchase of goods allows to experience emotions and, at the same time, emotions are transformed into goods (Illouz, 2018). In this sense, even the experience of love could become replaceable and interchangeable, according to one of the risks advocated by Simmel linked to a form of ‘decline’ of modernity: the devaluation of individuality wrapped in a process of objectification that mainly considers the exchange value of relationships, their instrumental relevance.

## **6. Danilo Martuccelli: love as an “emotional imperative”**

The Peruvian sociologist Danilo Martuccelli also carried out an in-depth analysis on love, considering the latter, in contemporary society, as a support of individual meaning different from the support of collective meaning: what gives meaning to personal lives, does not give (enough) meaning from a collective point of view. In everyday life, love, in addition to being perceived as an emotional experience, has become both a great ideal – for example, in its name many people find, every day, the strength to go to work – and a promise of happiness. In its absence, life loses its meaning: for many individuals, for example, a series of factors such as ambitions, power, the pursuit of wealth, etc., largely lose their meaning.

Martuccelli argues by reasoning on data produced by quantitative analyzes inherent to the relationship between economic wealth and

personal happiness: the results show that, once a wealth threshold (often set at around fifteen thousand dollars of annual income) is crossed, individual aspirations shift towards more spiritual or postmaterialist values.

Although contemporary societies continue to be predominantly organized around material comfort, income growth and expanding consumption, the figures say that the highest rates of happiness indicate marital and family relationships for 47% and for 24% health, before falling to much more modest figures for all the other components (Martuccelli, 2013). These data can be explained through the secularization of the love experience, which has produced the transfer of the search for the meaning of life from the religious sphere to a more worldly one. If, for a long time, religion has been the answer to the search for meaning, at least in its strictly spiritual dimension, it has now lost its monopoly. Individuals today feel 'taken' by a 'sense' whose ultimate origin is deposited in someone else, without however thinking of the other as 'greater' than themselves. In my opinion, the similarities with Simmel's reflections on the relationship between Ego and Alter discussed in paragraphs 3 and 4 are evident.

As Martuccelli points out, love thus assumes a daily horizontal transcendence and becomes an everyday emotional imperative. On the other hand, just think of the transition from a society in which love was rare – or extraordinary –, to the point that it did not even have a precise social function (as evidenced by the lack of recognition, for many centuries, of the marriage of love), to societies in which, on the contrary, love is considered an indispensable and common experience in everyone's lives. It is so impossible, for example, to conceive one's own lives – and even the same normality or psychic maturation – outside of love: its absence is experienced – and today increasingly diagnosed by self-help manuals or some psychotherapists – as a personal bankruptcy (Martuccelli, 2013).

In these terms, and unlike Simmel who does not specify the ‘space’ of love, the Peruvian sociologist confers a decisive importance to the role assumed by everyday life in contemporary life: at the same time a place of happiness and emptiness, a space in which one searches and builds its own identity, it has become the epicenter of personal lives, what everyone talks about and where emotions are expressed.

According to Martuccelli (2013, 2016, 2017), love has become an enchanted experience within a globally disenchanted world. In such a context, many daily life anxieties look for solutions in new realms. Love is possibly the predominant one since, differently from religion, it paves the way to an idea of original transcendence generating social egalitarianism. Thus, the importance of the daily life is clear. It is actually the background of more or less repetitive experiences and routines, among which love and the whole realm of sense it provides appear as indispensable. Thanks to love, which is the extraordinary-ordinary element of daily life, the double promise of conversion of the ordinary into the extraordinary and of the extraordinary into the ordinary is fulfilled. The growing importance of the daily life, and the core of love as source of meaning, can also be given a very different explanation, for instance, as the side effect of the increase of available time besides work and sleep. As Jean Viard stresses, such a time extension provides our lives with two equally important centres of gravity, work and free time. It is not fully absurd, then, to link the extension of life expectancy, from the 1900s, and the growing expansion of love demand. While in 1900 work and sleep would take up 70% of the available life time, today they do not make up for more than 40% combined. In absolute terms, from 100.000 hours available besides work and sleep in 1900, we reached almost 400.000 hours today (Viard, 2011: 14, 15, 32). It is a fundamental difference. We live ‘more’ and therefore we have – or want to have – ‘many’ lives (both professionally and emotionally) within just ‘one’ compared to previous generations. At any rate, the objective surplus of life time



leads to the fact that spare time, the time available besides work and sleep, hence our daily life, is much more important and significant now than in the past. Finally, such a timeframe and life realm – the daily life – have been widely invested with and absorbed by love-related concerns (Martuccelli, 2013: 161).

Today, therefore, love would be sought as a form of redemption from daily frustrations, as a regenerating balm in a world dominated by so-called sad passions, as a utopian possibility of escaping the cold rules of rational order as well as the boring and taken-for-granted world of everyday life. An escape from the everyday within the everyday itself.

According to Martuccelli, however, this does not mean that the experience of love guarantees that social cohesion and integration into the community required by society: as indeed his theory of ‘implicative affectivity’ highlights, participation in collective life always translates into a constraint on the freedom and authenticity of the individual. Once again, important links to Simmel's reflections concerning the ambivalence of modernity emerge.

In conclusion, therefore, it is possible to state that love permeates our society, its images, representations, public discourse. It is an emotional imperative, the inspiration of writers, playwrights, film directors:

While it is maybe an exaggeration to claim that love experiences are the direct and skilfully orchestrated result of cultural industries, it is however clear that its widespread generalisation is inseparable from its massive representation in advertising, novels, films and songs. The importance of love is directly linked to the constant development of narrative intrigues and cultural representations concerning an experience which is described as equally unexpected, unique, enchanted, and ordinary. At any rate, only after such an explosion of

imagination we actually transitioned from societies where love was rare – or extraordinary – to the point of not even having a precise social function (as proven by the lack of legal recognition of love-based marriages for many centuries), towards societies where love, instead, is taken as an indispensable experience common to everybody's existence. Love is now an emotional imperative. It is therefore impossible, for instance, to conceive of our lives – or even normality and psychological maturity – outside of love; and its absence is taken – and sometimes diagnosed – as a personal failure (Martuccelli, 2013: 159, my transl.).

Paradoxical and oxymoronic: risk becomes security. The whole point fits into the ambivalence characterising, as stated by Simmel, love itself. Love, after having risked to disappear in the rise of modern and post-modern society with all its freedom and individuality of choices and possibilities among several *ad-ventures*, comes back to the top as potential shelter from all the turmoil of the contemporary time.

## 7. Conclusion

At the end of this article, I believe it is possible to state how useful it can be today to rediscover and deepen the sociological study produced by Simmel to understand contemporary emotional interactions. Today's transformations of love can be understood starting from afar, so, re-reading Simmel's reflections on the ambivalence of the sentiment in question: the defense of one's autonomy, the protection of one's individuality, and then, at the same time, the almost anxious search for an intimacy between two and the inevitable consequence: the fear of dependence on the other and therefore of the loss of one's freedom.

Especially in society, it is possible to affirm how Simmel's predictions have come true: today there is a clash between the need

for autonomy and individual affirmation as well as the desire and need for recognition of another by oneself. As also underlined by Illouz and Martuccelli, the difficulty of encountering these two apparently irreconcilable tendencies is still expressed today (or, perhaps, especially today) in the relationship of love: an irrepressible form of sociality even for those present-day individuals imbued with capitalist myths, self-sufficiency, self-realization, profit, efficiency.

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