



Georg Simmel and the “Relational Turn”. Contributions to the foundation of the *Lebenssoziologie* since Simmel

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Article abstract

The first aim of the paper is an interpretation of Georg Simmel’s sociology in “relational terms” – i.e., under the categories of the “relational sociology”; it focuses, thus, to show how Simmel’s social theory and philosophy of culture fit for the construction of a *Lebenssoziologie*. Considering Simmel as a “relational sociologist” means to demonstrate how his contribution is decisive to the history of sociology, since he defines the “Wechselwirkung” (reciprocity, relational exchange) and its *forms* as the very matter of the social sciences. Simmel represents the “relational turn” in the wide sociological *milieu*. Since Simmel’s contribution, sociology attempted to consider and investigate social facts in terms of “relation” and reciprocity. The current sociological debate insists on considering Simmel as a “relational” sociologist in various declinations (coherent to Bourdieu’s social theory or to the social network analysis framework). In his late essays and books Simmel gives a “vitalist” accent to the analysis of social facts: the social is above all “social life”, according to the consolidated forms/contents dialectical model. *Grundfragen der Soziologie. Individuum und Gesellschaft* represents his last attempt to corroborate a sort of “sociology of life” (*Lebenssoziologie*). Even if this term does not explicitly appear in Simmel’s words, it summarizes his social and cultural theory - since the volume *Soziologie* - and offers some key-concepts for the successive sociological debate.

Davide Ruggieri

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Preface

Jeffrey Alexander once claimed: “Social science discoveries are textually mediated by classics” (Alexander, 1988: 99). This proposition basically fits to the main purpose of the thesis sustained in this paper, since it aims at sustaining a relational interpretation of Simmel’s theory and it attempts to link a relational view of sociology to the *Lebenssoziologie*. Relational sociology is nowadays seen as a list of authors, in the contemporary debate, whose main subject of inquiry are the “relations”: Norbert Elias, Pierre Bourdieu, Mustafa Emirbayer, Nick Crossley, Pierpaolo Donati, Charles Tilly etc. My first question is then in which terms it is possible to consider Georg Simmel “a relational (or relationist) sociologist”, and second how fruitful were his intuitions to the foundation of the “relational sociology” *sensu strictissimo* (Powell and Dépelteau, 2013a; 2013b). These basic questions arise, at the very first glance, on the main subject of Simmel’s sociology, the notion of “Wechselwirkung”, as well as from the recent interpretation in “relationist terms” of Simmel’s theory (Cantó Milà, 2005; Erickson, 2013). It is quite known that Simmel was firstly considered (and misunderstood) as a “relativist”: for instance, Jankélévitch was one of the first authors who interpreted Simmel’s theory under both of categories of “life” and “relativism” (Jankélévitch, 1925).

I argue for a “relationist” interpretation of Simmel’s contribution: it means not “relativism”, but a social and philosophical theory based first on the notion of “relation”. The relation is then the “molecule” of social and inner life of

individuals, and this point is the basis to build a *Lebenssoziologie*, which is the science inquiring the forms of social lives.

In a letter, sent to Heinrich Rickert in 1916, Simmel explicitly asserted (and clarified) that his philosophy of culture and his social theory were grounded on the idea of “relation”, and this fact did not mean at all to theorize a strong “relativism” (that is, the “truth” concept does not exist or it is a floating and empty word):

[...] Dass Wahrheit eine *Relation* von Inhalten zueinander bedeutet, deren keiner für sich besitzt, grade wie kein Körper für sich schwer ist, sondern nur im Wechselverhältnis mit einem andern. Dass *einzelne* Wahrheiten in Ihrem Sinne relative sind, interessiert mich dabei garnicht, grade nur ihr *Ganzes* ist es, oder richtiger: ihr *Begriff* (Simmel, 2008: 638).

Simmel finds in the “relation” the key-concept to analyse the modern age (as he did with the publication of *Philosophie des Geldes*) and the social facts as the *formal* result of the interaction among human beings. This intuition allowed him to investigate the “interstitial spaces” between culture and society, i.e., in those “forms” generated by the progressive and more and more intensive differentiation of modern society and culture.

Köhnke advanced important and detailed arguments in favour of a “relationist” interpretation of Simmel thought: formerly adopted in *Philosophie des Geldes* as a heuristic principle in the theory of knowledge, the dynamic relationship of *Wechselwirkung* is a category that relates precisely subject and object in a procedural, interactive and open logic, which are detectable in certain forms of society and culture (Köhnke, 1996: 480 ff.).

Jeffrey Alexander’s motto also fits to the way to consider social theory in the frame of a historical constitution of the social epistemology - and then of its own subject. What the previous sociologists wrote at the time is not only an interest area for philologists or historians, but they described social processes and

facts through “concepts”¹ that keep on telling us how to comprehend “social process and facts”, which are structured in relational forms.

Levine highlighted the clear neuralgic and transversal role played by Simmel in the 19th century academic and scientific fields of the Social Theory and Sociology:

I recall vividly an exchange with the late Max Horkheimer when he visited The University of Chicago as guest professor in the mid-1950s. At the time, I was pursuing my doctoral research on Simmel and Parsons. When Horkheimer learned that I was working on Simmel, he sighed and remarked, «Ach ja! Simmel ist der einzige Soziologe, den man heute noch lesen kann» (Simmel is the only sociologist whom one can still read [with profit] today) (Levine, 1989: 161)².

In the 1980s, David Frisby and Donald Levine on the “Atlantic side”, together with Otthein Rammstedt and Klaus Köhnke on the “Continental side”, led to a surprising re-discovery of this sociological classic, so that it was a real “Simmel Renaissance” (Blevgat, 1989; Aronowitz, 1994).

(The history of) Sociology is surely in debt with Simmel: among his direct pupils and auditors we list Robert E. Park, Leopold von Wiese, György Lukács, Siegfried Kracauer, Ernst Bloch, Rainer Maria Rilke, Lou von Salomé, Hermann Schmalenbach, Martin Buber, Sabine Lepsius, Margarete Susman, to name just some. It is also quite sure that Simmel’s “seeds” blossomed in the Universities of Chicago and Harvard, took root in the New School for Social Research (NCSR) and at

¹ I disagree with Emirbayer, who is one of the most influential “relational sociologists” in the global panorama and who explicitly denies any kind of cataloguing of social facts, talking about “anti-categorical imperative” (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994: 1414; Emirbayer, 1997).

² There was also someone who has completely disregarded Simmel, such as Peter-Ernst Schnabel. He looked at Simmel as one of the most meaningful cultural “animator” instead of a “rigorous sociologist or philosopher” (Schnabel, 1976: 16).

the Columbia University; it is clear that the name and the theory of Simmel were bound to Robert Park, Albert Salomon or Robert K. Merton, and somehow also to Talcott Parsons, Alfred Schütz and Erwin Goffman.

Some concepts and sociological categories of Simmel's theory were adopted by Mustafa Emirbayer, Nick Crossley (Crossley, 2012), and basically by the main sociologists in the New School for Social Research (namely Harrison White and Charles Tilly): ample use of some "relational" categories can also be found in Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu.

The recent publication of the volumes *Conceptualizing Relational Sociology* (Powell e Dépelteau, 2013) and *Applying Relational Sociology* (Powell e Dépelteau, 2013a), collecting contributions from the most meaningful relational sociologists, focused the very topical debate on the "relational sociology": most authors simply mention Georg Simmel's name through successful locutions or intuitions, but there is no systematic treatment of the topic discussed in these pages.

Pierpaolo Donati first recognized Georg Simmel's "relational turn" in sociology (Donati, 2009: 23): he was the first sociologist to realize that the main subject of social science is a dynamic effect (then becoming a *form*) of a continuous and constitutive relational interaction among individuals. Donati then criticized Simmel's attempt to extend and exasperate the *Wechselwirkung* formula as a metaphysical principle and the way to treat "relation" as a form of relativism (*Philosophy of money*).

According to Donati, "relational sociology" means a reformulation of the four-patterned AGIL (*Adaptation; Goal attainment; Integration; Latency or Latent pattern maintenance*) scheme in Talcott Parsons' social theory: Donati tries to go beyond Parsons' functionalist (and then cybernetic) model, adopting an interdepending and a circular form of AGIL. In Donati's thought, AGIL is not simply an analytical instrument to detect social actions or facts: it is the "molecule" of the social itself, i.e., it transfers the socio-ontological questions from the individual

being to the “relations” (Donati, 2009: 25 and ff.). The relation is thus both “structure” and “event”: the first locution is defined by *religo* and *refero*, that are, respectively, the A-I and G-L axis in the AGIL scheme; the second one is defined by the morphogenetic dimension of social facts (following Margaret Archer’s social theory).

I sustain that, if we identify in the relation the point of intersection of the pre-social sphere in human beings (“human nature”) and meta-social (ultimate truths and values) (Archer, 2003), we can sure find *ante litteram* this idea in Simmel’s masterpiece *Soziologie*, since he sustained that the social science is a median discipline between two opposites “fields of knowledge”: on the one hand the (social) “epistemology” [*Erkenntnistheorie*], on the other hand the “metaphysics of the particular discipline” [*Metaphysik der fraglichen Einzelgebiete*] (Simmel, 1992: 40).

The life itself – and its deepest meaning – is a relational phenomenon: it is impossible to give a static definition of life without recurring to the conceptual (and ontological) “relation” category. What Simmel meant for “life” (and “social life”) is better described in his late books and essays. We can find an exhaustive explanation of life in *The Fragmentary Character of Life* [*Der Fragmentcharakter des Lebens*], which first appeared in August 1916 in the journal «Logos» and represents a preparatory study for the second chapter of Simmel’s last great philosophical testament, *View of Life* [*Lebensanschauung*] published in September 1918.

Then life appears to be something lived always at the intersection of multiple worlds, always garnering particles utterly particular in nature from the God’s eye perspective of each absolutely self-subsistent categorial world – and composing itself from these particles. Life makes up a whole, yet so too does each categorial world. Where life and worlds intersect, they create fragments – fragments of life, fragments of worlds (Simmel, 2012: 247).

According to Bergson and Nietzsche's metaphysical viewpoint, life is for Simmel a continuous stream and self-overcoming; it is an eternal flux, which needs form and structure. Simmel's dialectics of *Mehr-Leben* and *Mehr-als-Leben* is the attempt to establish a metaphysics of social and cultural world in which forms are essential mediations for the comprehension of life in its complexity and totality.

Many years before, in his first programmatic essay on sociology (*Das Problem der Sociologie*, published in 1894), Simmel already detected in the distinction of "forms" and "contents" the principal aim for the sociologist to give to the social science an autonomous place among the *Geisteswissenschaften*. Social entities, such as historical ones, consist of an "interlacement" [*Ineinsbildung*] between forms and contents: the first and foremost task for the sociologist is to isolate forms from contents. The sociologist is then a scientist who recognizes (and isolates) forms from contents in the process of *Wechselwirkung*, that is "reciprocity", "interaction", dynamic "relation".

According to Scott Lash's interpretation – in his essay *Lebenssoziologie. Georg Simmel in the information Age* (Lash, 2005) – Simmel basically and definitively sets the subject of sociology around the problem of "forms" (i.e., values) of society and modern culture. In other terms, the very question of sociology stands as the individuation of a constellation of values, which is the result of a dynamic and reciprocal interaction: the transaction is intrinsically guaranteed by the *a priori* cultural and social condition for the values.

God is to Christianity what nature is to the Renaissance and Enlightenment. From the 19th century, Simmel sees 'society' (*Gesellschaft*) as playing such a role. This is challenged by «life» from the turn of the 20th century. In each case – in this transition from God to nature to society to life – Simmel sees the hegemonic category as a «value». In each case it is a «form» (Lash, 2005: 4).

These values, considered as a form, represent the necessary mediation in a relational structure: as already sustained in many passages of his *Philosophy of money*, Simmel has argued for a theory of value, “third emerging element” (Ruggieri, 2016a) in the transaction between (almost) two actors or factors. According to Lash, Simmel acquired this idea directly from the philosophical influences of his *Zeitgeist*, and particularly from “vitalism”. On the one hand, Henri Bergson contributed to focus the theoretical speculation on the peculiar subject of life (under various meanings of “conscience”, stream, *durée*); on the other hand, Nietzsche had a great impact on Simmel for what concerns the way to intend life as self-overcoming (under the category of “will to live”). The differentiated character of the modern society and culture demands more and more an intensive and progressive mediation of “forms”. The dialectics, which regulates the “tragedy of modern culture”, underpins this sociological (and metaphysical) configuration and this legitimates a teleological view rather than a simple mechanism. Simmel denotes the way to scientifically address social facts in sociology without neglecting the concept of “end”: social processes are regulated from a “purpose-shaped” dynamics. Lash asserts: “Vitalism, in contrast to mechanism, is non-linear, presupposing not external but self-causality, what Georg Simmel like his disciple Gyorgy Lukàcs, following Aristotle, called «teleology». These are self-producing or self-organizing systems” (Lash, 2005: 2).

This idea was already formulated by Simmel in his previous systematic elaboration of the concept of social “relation”, i.e. in *Das Problem der Sociologie* (1894).

I will argue my paper focussing on the “relational” interpretation of Simmel’s theory (I particularly refer to the “relational” meaning given by Pierpaolo Donati), demonstrating how this issue fits with the construction of the sociology as the science of “forms of social life”. In contrast with the meaning of “Lebenssoziologie”, accorded by Lash and clarified with the just mentioned quotation, I will consider Simmel as the first

sociologist who furnished a “social ontology” of forms of social life. I propose, therefore, to interpret the *Lebenssoziologie* as the science (sociology) treating its subject (social life), that is those forms given by the interaction among individuals and mediated by “cultural” issues.

The question of relation: the basis for a (relational) sociology

In 1894 Simmel attempts to corroborate a coherent social theory, by completing a parabola from to the first chapter of *Über soziale Differenzierung. Soziologische und psychologische Untersuchungen* (1890), since he elaborated an epistemology for the enquiry of the social facts (the theoretical premise to his analysis of the “social differentiation”). In *Das Problem der Sociologie* the first aim is to find a specific subject for sociology, that is to find a “demarcation criterion” that allows to consider sociology a science among other sciences. Luhmann reduced the ontological problem of sociology in Simmel to its epistemology: in a recursive-constructivist horizon (and under a “self-referential” theoretical form), Luhmann asserts that Simmel’s epistemology and his social ontology coexist in the same system model (Luhmann, 1993). On the contrary, Pierre Bourdieu has strongly remarked how (relational) sociology must consider as its core focus the issue of “subject” in sociology under the category of “relation”. Bourdieu stressed this concept with the formula: “to think in terms of field is to think *relationally*” (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 26) and then asserted that the social world is not to be conceived in a realistic or substantialist (Cassirer) way: “the real is relational” is the notorious explaining motto of Bourdieu’s theory.

The foremost purpose of Simmel’s sociological inquiry in the 1890s is to find a specific scientific subject: as he already observed in *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* about the constitution of historical matter, objective validity is not granted

by a simple correspondence of entities in reality, but by the *a priori* interconnection between the subjective and objective spheres. The historical (and then also social) phenomenon holds a peculiar and *sui generis* synthetic unity: it does not derive exclusively from subjective faculties (unlike Kantian epistemology), but from a synthesis *in re*. This is the revision of some neo-Kantian themes: Simmel was deeply influenced by the epistemological debate in the late 19th century. This idea of a synthesis *in re*, which testifies an active relation among beings – Michael Kern translates *Wechselwirkung* with “reciprocal orientation” (Kaern, 1990: 84) – will be further deepened by Simmel in the *Excursus* to the first chapter of *Soziologie* (1908).

In the first pages of *Über soziale Differenzierung* (in a chapter that is symptomatically named “Zur Erkenntnistheorie der Sozialwissenschaft”) Simmel affirms:

Wenn es also die Aufgabe der Soziologie ist, die Formen des Zusammenseins von Menschen zu beschreiben und die Regeln zu finden, nach denen das Individuum, insofern es Mitglied einer Gruppe ist, und die Gruppen untereinander sich verhalten, so hat die Kompliziertheit dieser Objekte eine Folge für unsere Wissenschaft, die sie in einer erkenntnistheoretischen Beziehung, der ich eine ausführliche Begründung widmen muss, neben die Metaphysik und die Psychologie stellt (Simmel, 1989: 118).

The “objectivity” issue in sociology (then, the primary epistemological question) is resolved by Simmel with the individuation of a peculiar *realitas sui generis*: the *Wechselwirkung* is the key-concept that gives to the sociologist the legitimation to argue a sociological inquiry. In the following pages, Simmel explicitly sustains that “[...] es nur einen Grund gibt, der eine wenigstens relative Objektivität der Vereinheitlichung abgibt: die Wechselwirkung der Teile” (Simmel, 1989: 129). In the social sciences, therefore, the purpose is to isolate in this relational mechanism (Simmel uses the term “morphologischen Erscheinung”) “forms” from contents. This idea complies with

Margaret Archer's (who elaborated a social *morphogenetic* theory) and Pierpaolo Donati's recent contributions. The morphogenetic paradigm was conceived as an explanation for the transformation of social and cultural structures, as it is a process mediated by human agency (Archer, 1979; 1995). Donati affirms that the core of any social inquiry should be considered the "relation", under a substantial reconsideration of Parsons' AGIL scheme:

We can represent the social relation as a molecule whose structure consists in four elements (C = values, N = norms, T = targets, M = means) and in their connections (the six links or 'bonds'). Each element has a border with a specific environment: values with its environment of ultimate realities (or ultimate concerns), norms with the environment of collective rules, targets with the environment of the interests owned by others, and means with the environment of resources and opportunities (Donati, 2015: 99).

If Simmel only drafts a systematic and scientific discourse around sociology (and its subject) in both the books mentioned above, the publication of the essay *Das Problem der Sociologie* in 1894 represents yet the more convincing attempt (and the first real step) to ground a new science – the *social* science – under the category of *Wechselwirkung*. He literally affirms that sociologists must address "forms" of *association* (*Vergesellschaftung*), which derive from the relational and primary mechanism of "reciprocity" (*Wechselwirkung*). The program of sociology as an independent science was laid: Simmel had in mind to develop two main branches of the investigation on the forces, the forms, and the processes for the *Vergesellschaftung* (Simmel, 1992: 57): the historical one and the systematic one. He did not even equip a further systematic treatment of what he meant then for "forms" of *Vergesellschaftung*: "superiority and subordination, concurrence, proximity, opposition, division of labour" – drafted in 1894 and then remarked in *Soziologie* in 1908 (Simmel, 1992: 55; Simmel, 1992a: 21). In his 1908 volume, Simmel adopted new terms to mean "reciprocity" (and its forms): *Wechselbeziehung*,

Beziehungsformen, Wechselwirkung. He remarked this principle on the dichotomy *Wechselwirkung/Vergesellschaftung*:

Erst indem derartige Wechselbeziehungen, durch gewisse Motive und Interessen hervorgerufen, wirksam werden, entsteht Gesellschaft; so sehr also freilich die Geschichte und die Gesetze der so erwachsenden Gesamtgebilde Sache der Gesellschaftswissenschaft im weiteren Sinne ist, so bleibt, da diese schon in die einzelnen sozialen Wissenschaften auseinander gegangen ist, für eine Soziologie im engeren Sinne, in dem, der eine besondere Aufgabe stellt, nur noch die Betrachtung der abstrahierten Formen übrig, die nicht sowohl die Vergesellschaftung *bewirken*, als vielmehr die Vergesellschaftung *sind*; Gesellschaft in dem Sinne, den die Soziologie verwenden kann, ist dann entweder der abstrakte Allgemeinbegriff für diese Formen, die Gattung, deren Arten sie sind, oder die jeweilig wirksame Summe derselben (Simmel, 1992: 24).

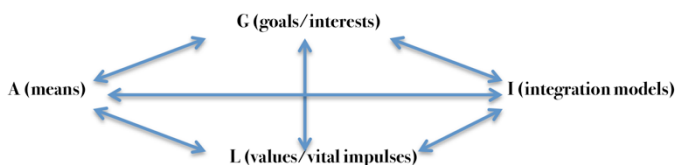
Social forms endure autonomously from individuals and their relations: they are “independent”. This is the distinctive feature of each form, depending on social and cultural facts (the “tragic” corollary of Simmel’s philosophy of culture). Forms are that *tertium datur* – to use an Ernst Bloch’s figure –: they always exceed individuals, even if the former get born from the latter. In this sense, sociology is similar to geometry in that they share the practice of isolating and addressing “pure forms” (pure figures) of interaction.

The question of relation lies in this formula: the sociological issue is relational, that is the *social* “real is relational” – as Bourdieu will claim some decades after in a post-Marxian context. The first relational principle (“the real is relational”) must be completed by an “emergentist” consideration of the formation of social reality. As Donati explains:

[...] Contrary to the transactional approaches, I argue that we cannot have a proper relational sociology unless we see the social relation as an emergent effect of a process of social

morphogenesis. From the point of view of a critical realist relational sociology (henceforth CRRS), social morphogenesis is a form of surplus of society with respect to itself. In order to understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to invoke a general theory of social relations that is able to show how the molecular structure of social relations in different contexts is altered. The morphogenetic surplus is not the product of structural effects but of ‘emergent relational effects’ (Donati, 2015: 87).

I summarized my relational interpretation of Simmel’s theory in the following scheme, that is a reformulation of the four-patterned analytical scheme used by Donati to investigate the social relation:



In the frame of the social interactions, Simmel basically recognized two kinds, or orders, of social forms: the first order (*Formen der Vergesellschaftung*) deals with the main subjects treated in *Soziologie* (1908), i.e. “[...] superiority and subordination, division of labour, formation of parties, inner solidarity coupled with exclusiveness toward the outside, and innumerable similar features in the State, in a religious community, in a band of conspirators, in an economic association, in an art of school, in the family” (Simmel, 1950: XXXIV, 22); the second order (*Geselligkeit*) concerns those models emerging as the pure and simple play-forms of sociability (Simmel, 1950: 43), that is “fashion, sociability, coquetterie, adventure” etc.

The second order (play-forms) becomes a model to comprehend the reality in the modern era, although they stem from ludic needs: this extreme superficiality, this “vane and

reified schematism” has nowadays become the first and foremost social realm. The individuals mediate their vital “worlds” through these schemes and this is surely a pernicious production of “false conscience” of relations. “False” is here not to be meant in the frame of a logic inversion of the relationship between false and true, but in relation to the distance degree to the concrete life. The massive use of fine technologies in our century realizes the natural destiny of social relations: if we think at the conversations on social networks based on false facts or spoof stories, that is but a frivolous, superficial social exchange. This seductive form of reciprocity is now legitimate and self-reproductive. But the question then is: what do we exchange in these new forms of social life if not only the form? We lose the content, we have lost the meaning and the purposes: this result was prophesied by Nietzsche’s nihilistic analysis, and we are yet living in the era of Nihilism. Simmel was very persuaded by Nietzsche’s moral deconstruction of Western culture, and this debt is really clear in the formulation of Simmelian “tragedy of culture”.

Our very personality is at stake, as Simmel attempted to demonstrate since the last chapter of *Philosophie des Geldes*. The more the modern society requires a “singular” lifestyle, the more we lose our personality, since they are inversely proportional entities. The involvement in these superficial play-forms requires the greatest sacrifice of what we keep innermost and personal, and the bigger is the social circle we belong, the deeper our loss will be.

Simmel and the relational paradigm in the *social network analysis* debate

The volume *Relationale Soziologie. Zur kulturellen Wende der Netzwerkforschung*, edited by Jan Fuhse and Sophie Mützel, appears in 2010. It collects many essays of theorists who named themselves “relational” according to (and after) the “cultural

turn” in the *Social Network Analysis* studies of Harrison White and Charles Tilly.

The methodological and theoretical background for Mützel and Fuhse’s relational sociology is thus the structural analysis in the form of network analysis – like the one developed by Structuralism in the United States (Mützel and Fuhse, 2010: 11). Relational Sociology builds itself on hypotheses and knowledge of structural analysis; it then develops and blends into cultural aspects such as stories/narratives, practices and meanings, and through historical processes. The Sociological American Structuralism research program developed in particular around Harrison White and Charles Tilly – and then «The New York School» was born around his figure (Mische, 2011).

According to White’s theory, networks are not to be seen as pure *structures*, but as *socio-cultural formations*, in which the patterns of meaning (“narrative” or “identity”) are just as important as the structure of social groups. All of the patterns of meaning connected to networks («story sets, symbols, idioms, resisters, grammatical patternings, and accompanying corporeal markers») are indicated by White as their «domains» (Mische and White, 1998: 702). These domains were only analytically isolable from the structure of the network (Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994; Fuhse, 2009; Yeung, 2005). On the contrary, Relational Sociology considers the structure of the networks, and the cultural forms related to them, as the most significant levels of social structures. Over the last thirty years, the observational tools and the study of network analysis have improved: with the help of «network generators» in interviews, important social relationships emerged among the respondents (friendship, partnership) as well as certain properties of the referents (gender, age, profession, ethnicity). This information is then transposed into mathematical terms (Fuhse, 2010, 182).

In Fuhse and Mützel’s reconstruction of the history of “relational sociology”, Simmel is represented as a precursor and a pioneer. Ronald Breiger – very often mentioned in the volume

Relational Soziologie – was one of the most meaningful theorist to promote the “Formal Concept Analysis”. The latter emerged in the 1980s from attempts to restructure lattice theory in order to enhance better communication between its theorists and potential users. Breiger, who spent his time to investigate the theme of duality between structure and culture in sociological analysis, devoted to Simmel a systematic study in this sense (Breiger, 1990). He claimed that since Leopold von Wiese (a theorist within the German “formal school”, centred around Georg Simmel) the first aim of network/lattice analysis is “[...] a static analysis of the sphere of the interhuman will [...*which*] consists in the dismemberment and the reconstruction of this system of relations” (Wiese, 1941: 29-30). Mustafa Emirbayer accepted Breiger’s theoretical suggestions in order to maintain together “interactional approaches such as statistical (variable) analysis” (Emirbayer, 1997: 298): Emirbayer meant this statement in his *Manifesto for a Relational sociology*.

Addressing Simmel’s studies and interpretations, Erickson had efficaciously remarked the difference between “Relationism” and “Formalism” in social theory. The “Relationist” approach basically rejects essentialism and *a priori* categories and insists upon the intersubjectivity of experience and meaning as well as on the importance of the content of interactions and their historical setting. On the contrary, Formalism should be based on a structuralist interpretation of Georg Simmel’s theoretical works (Erickson 2013).

I put forward the hypothesis that Simmel formulated then the way to overcome this dualism: to use Bourdieu’s explanation of *habitus* category, we can affirm that for Simmel the society is both “structuring structure” (agency) and “structured structure” (network, structure). In Simmel’s essay *Das Problem der Soziologie* (1894) he already fixed this idea through a “provisional” corollary:

Gesellschaft im weitesten Sinne ist offenbar da vorhanden, wo mehrere Individuen in *Wechselwirkung* treten. [...] Die

besonderen Ursachen und Zwecke, ohne die natürlich nie eine Vergesellschaftung erfolgt, bilden gewissermaßen den Körper, das *Material* des sozialen Prozesses; daß der Erfolg dieser Ursachen, die Förderung dieser Zwecke gerade eine Wechselwirkung, eine Vergesellschaftung unter den Trägern hervorruft, das ist die *Form*, in die jene Inhalte sich kleiden (Simmel, 1992: 54).

Wechselwirkung could be interpreted as the “structuring structure” in the formation of social forms, which can in turn be detected under *Vergesellschaftung* (“structured structure”). Therefore, sociologists should address social facts in relational terms, that is get into relation self, detecting the occurring *in* the society [*Geschehen in der Gesellschaft*] and what “society” is or means for society [*was an der Gesellschaft »Gesellschaft ist«*] (Simmel, 1992: 57).

Lebenssoziologie: “an incomplete Project”

The thesis of this paper is that the *Lebenssoziologie* represents the chance to develop Simmel’s “relational” sociology, particularly grounded on the “L” of *latency* in the mentioned four-patterned relational scheme AGIL (Donati, 2015), towards a construction of the “sociology of forms of life”. For Donati the “latency” pattern synthesizes values, symbols and ideas, which maintains the social system, and it deals with the link force and distribution of energy among individuals in the frame of that system.

Many authors recently argued for a “Lebenssoziologie”, explicitly referring to Simmel’s work. Scott Lash was in 2005 one of first authors – and certainly the most meaningful one – to tackle the question on the “Lebenssoziologie”. Lash asserts: “Simmel addresses life in terms of social life. This is the originality of his vitalism. For other vitalists, relations between things or between subjects and things are primary. Relations of perception are primary. For Simmel life is already social. For Simmel social life is literally social life” (Lash, 2005: 10). Lash

theorizes that Simmel's *Lebenssoziologie* anchors on three main "vitalist" principles: "monism, self-reproduction and becoming" – where for monism Lash means "social networks", considered both global and informational (referring to Castells' theory). This theoretical position lacks in the analysis of that "reflexive" relational sphere, which is the human property, giving to "relations" the social *sigillum*.

In 2015 Delitz, Seyfert and Nungasser individualized three main traditions of "Lebenssoziologie" in the frame of the contemporary sociology: 1) the neo-vitalist tradition, basically referring to Henri Bergson's philosophy and consisting of the contribution of authors as Cornelius Castoriadis, Gilles Deleuze, Georges Simondon or Canguilhem; 2) the German tradition, spread from the Philosophical Anthropology (around the names of Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, Arnold Gehlen); 3) the pragmatist tradition (Charles S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey and George H. Mead) (Delitz, Seyfert and Nungasser, 2015). Delitz, Seyfert and Nungasser just confined themselves to mention Simmel as intellectual source in the "Lebenssoziologie" contributions of Maffesoli and Lash.

In the essay *Zum historischen Verhältnis von Lebensphilosophie und Soziologie und das Programm einer Lebenssoziologie* (2008) Seyfert grasped some central issues, which fit to the purpose of this paper. He considered the "Emergenztheorem" in Simmel's theory (that is the paradoxical dualism between immanence of life as storm and its transcendence through forms) as the key-concept for the construction of a "Lebenssoziologie" program, since the possible ontology for a "Lebenssoziologie" consists exactly in the terms of the "emergence" (Seyfert, 2008: 4688-4689).

I suggest to read the "relation" and the "form" as both the primary concepts to construct in Simmel a "Lebenssoziologie": the *relation* immediately refers to "Wechselwirkung", as the dynamic interaction, generating the social sphere; the *form* deals with the property of "Wechselwirkung" to get static and to

orientate individual actions. This last concept fits with the idea of “Vergesellschaftung”, that Simmel already in the sociological essays of 1890s mentioned beside the central paradigm of “Wechselwirkung” in order to clarify the social sphere and the subject of the emerging social science.

Simmel focused on the “social forms” inquiry as the primary task for the social science: they must be viewed as embedded behaviour (or structured agency) in the frame of a “cultural” system. The cultural frame concretises through the continuous (and tragic) dialectics of the “creative soul” (*die Seele* or *der subjective Geist*) and all the objectifications of reifications of the Spirit (*die Vergegenständlichung des Geistes* or *der objektiver Geist*). These argumentations strongly show traces of the intellectual debate on “life”, besides through the irrational movements, which were for Simmel a stimulating source.

On the “Lebensphilosophie” subject, it is well-known that Simmel was largely influenced by Nietzsche and Schopenhauer – in some fundamental questions such as the matter of life as “will” and “conflict” without resolution and the set (and deconstruction) of values in the frame of moral argumentations – and lately by Henri Bergson – towards a cultural sociology or a philosophy of culture which had the purpose to develop some main Bergson’s intuitions on the conscience, on the opposition between external and internal time, on the *durée* etc. And Simmel was surely influenced, as Lichtblau remarked, by many artistic and cultural movements *fin de siècle*: “Naturalismus, Impressionismus, Symbolismus, Jugendstil und der *Dekadenz*” played a strategic and central role in the constitution of Simmel’s philosophy and sociology of culture. “Wie kein anderer Soziologe und Kulturphilosoph – writes Lichtblau – hat Georg Simmel in einer ausgezeichneten Weise alle Lagen und Wechselströme des «Zeitgeistes» der Jahrhundertwende in seinen eigenen Schriften reflektiert und produktiv verarbeitet” (Lichtblau, 1996).

In his masterpiece *Soziologie*, Simmel explains the second *apriori* in his *Soziale erkenntnistheorie* arguing:

Das Apriori des empirischen sozialen Lebens ist, dass das Leben nicht ganz sozial ist, wir formen unsere Wechselbeziehungen nicht nur unter der negative Reserve eines in sie nicht eintretenden Teiles unserer Persönlichkeit; dieser Teil wirkt nicht nur durch allgemeine psychologische Verknüpfungen überhaupt auf die sozialen Vorgänge in der Seele ein, sondern grade die formale Tatsache, dass er außerhalb der letzteren steht, bestimmt die Art dieser Einwirkung (Simmel, 1992a: 52).

In this specification Simmel suggests a systematic difference between (almost) two kinds of lives: 1) an *empirical* social life in which we experience the *Wechselbeziehungen*; 2) something standing “above” the social life. In this matter on the social ontology and epistemology, in which Simmel is more Kantian than other topics, a “hidden” side of social relation plays a key-role in the definition of the “social life”. It is the *black box* operating within the relations.

If the former edition of *Das Problem der Sociologie* (1894) basically lacked the term (and the question itself) of “social life” (*das soziale Leben*), in the first chapter homonymous of *Soziologie* (1908) the perspective radically changed. Simmel basically recognizes (almost) two levels of the social life: the individual/personal one and the social one *strictu senso*. The second arises thanks to and beyond the negative reserve of the personal life: that means that the social subject exactly consists of the relational sphere emerging from interaction and this particular dialectics.

In the famous excursus *How is the society possible?* of the first Chapter of *Soziologie*, the terms “Leben” and “Lebensprozess” are very frequent, but the very crucial essay to this theme is sure *Grundfragen der Soziologie*, published in 1917. We find there an uncountable recurrence of the terms dealing the “social life”. Simmel argues for a proper “life of the society” [*das Leben der Gesellschaft*], which concretizes in some specific “forms”. The

society is then described as an “event” [*Geschehen*] – “the destiny and the form” - in which we live and experience [*erleben*] our being connected to other people (Simmel, 1999: 69-70). The form is literally a “connection” [*Verbindung*], introduced by a subject who operates in the sense (and with the purpose) of connecting.

Society is, first, the-complex-of-societalized individuals, the societally formed human material, as it constitutes the whole historical reality. Secondly, however, ‘society’ is also the sum of those forms of relationship [*Beziehungsformen*] by virtue of which individuals are transformed precisely into ‘society’ in the first sense [...] Society then in the sense that is of use to sociology is either the abstract, general concept of all these forms - the genus whose species they are or it is their sum operating at a particular time (Simmel, 1992a: 23).

One serious question could be, therefore, the meaning accorded by Simmel to the “relation”, since he frequently uses the terms “*Beziehung*”, “*Wechselbeziehung*”, “*Wechselwirkung*”, “*Relation*” without providing any epistemological or ontological difference among them. But we cannot discuss here on this subject.

In Simmel’s masterpiece *Soziologie* we find traces of a foundation of a social ontology as well as a social epistemology [*soziale Erkenntnistheorie*] – since the first attempts in the first chapter of *Ueber sociale Differenzierung* (1890). The main subject is the “relation” intended as interaction or reciprocity: Simmel draws the question dealing the “forms” of the social interaction, but he does not furnish in this book already any systematic theory of forms of “social life”. It must be expected the “vitalist” turn that he experienced since he found in Nietzsche and Bergson a good source of inspiration to argue for a “vital social theory”. In *Grundfragen der Soziologie* (1917) and in his last contribution *Lebensanschauung* (1918) Simmel gives an impulse to the interpretation of social facts under the semantics of “social life”. Thus, he lands to the well-known dialectics of “more-life” and

“more-than-life”. In the last mentioned books, he considers the “forms” as the necessary (abstract) mediation in the immanent process called “life” (intended as “continuous self-overcoming”): the social and the cultural forms are then the medium for the common human co-existence, the objectification of inner subjective Spirit as necessary “stage” for self-knowledge.

Those forms that compose the mind’s proper activity, those mental powers that shape the world’s materials, nevertheless subsist in the first instance utterly in life. They are the necessities that a particular course of life with a particular character in a given milieu of the world trains and exercises for itself in the same manner as it does its particular limbs and species functions. Life streams through these forms like a river surging forth through the waves of its current (Simmel, 2012: 239).

Simmel provides a wider idea of sociology as an inquiry on the forms of social life, and this idea is strongly explained in *Grundfragen der Soziologie* (1917), that represents the last and most meaningful Simmel’s attempt to ground a social theory on the basis of a vital conception of cultural and social relations. It is also peculiar that Simmel does not forego the conflict dimension in social and cultural issues. In the first lines of the fourth chapter *Individuum und Gesellschaft in Lebensanschauungen des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts (Beispiel der Philosophischen Soziologie)*, Simmel identifies a central question:

The really practical problem of society is the relation between its forces and forms and the individual’s own life. The question is not whether society exists only in the individuals or also outside of them. For even if we attribute «life», properly speaking, only to individuals, and identify the life of society with that of its individual members, we must still admit the existence of conflict between the two. One reason for this conflict is the fact that, in the individuals themselves, social elements fuse into the particular phenomenon called «society». «Society» develops its own vehicles and organs by whose claims and commands the individual is confronted as by an alien party. A second reason

results from another aspect of the inherency of society in the individual (Simmel, 1957: 58).

The society is a “sui generis” entity, which “emerges” among individual reciprocal interactions (Ruggieri, 2016a) and it exists thanks to and beyond individuals: it works also for its forms. The conflictual aspect of society, i.e., the fact that it exists in, through, and outside individuals, refers also to its inner vital aspect: what we call the “social life” is an urgent question, that about one hundred years ago Simmel already stated.

In Simmel’s essay *Soziologie der Ueber und Unter-Ordnung* (1907) he claimed that:

[...] The forms or functions that life, for its own sake, has produced from its own vitality now become so autonomous and definite that conversely life serves them and arranges its contents into them; and the success of this arrangement serves just as much as an ultimate realization of value and meaning as did previously the introduction of these forms into the economy of life (Simmel, 2000: 253).

In the frame of a re-evaluation of the Critical Theory, Rahel Jaeggi has recently investigated the issue of “social life forms”, and then approaching on the fundamental questions dealing the “Lebenssoziologie”. In her book *Kritik von Lebensformen* (2014), she sustains that the “forms of life” refer to “[...] a culturally informed «order of human co-existence» that encompasses an «ensemble of practices and orientations» as well as their institutional manifestations and materializations” (Jaeggi, 2015: 17). According to Jaeggi, the forms of life are “inert bundles of social practices”. In any form of life, she then finds a trace of “practices and orientations” due to four fundamental conditions (apriori?) (Jaeggi, 2015):

- a) Intentionality
- b) Interpretability
- c) Normativity
- d) Finalism

For Jaeggi an “immanent critique” is possible when “problems, crisis and conflicts” emerge within the forms of life: “the moment of crisis forces reflection and/or adjustments of practices that were previously ignored”, then recurring to the problem-solving scheme within a pragmatist frame.

The idea to investigate the co-existence and the reciprocal influence between vital and economic issues is also very frequent in Honneth’s last contributions.

According to Axel Honneth in the analysis of the modern capitalism, it is possible to find a new “weave” between the sphere of individual life and that of work/employment, i.e., between the sphere of the *Lebenswelt* and the rationalistic-functional organization of the society. The modern capitalistic system does not require only a complete involvement of individuals in spending their ambitions and forces in the employment, but we reach a “paradoxical” situation through a twofold impulse: “the informalization of the economic and economization of the informal” (Honneth, 2010). In line with the studies by Chiapello and Boltanski in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, we experienced a real “colonization” of that individual and private *Lebenswelt* (Kratzer, 2003) by the forces of the modern economic rationality.

Honneth acknowledged in Simmel’s theory the first efficacious attempt to describe this critical aspect of modern individualization of social life (in relation to the progressive implementation of the differentiation factor): Honneth sees that Simmel has elaborated the conflicting aspects of modern society under the two great categories of “rationalization” (Weber) and “individualization” (Durkheim). Simmel problematized the individualization through the principal four forms of its realization: a) the individualization of life courses; b) the isolation of social actors; c) the increase of reflexive faculties; d) the increase of requests for authenticity in individual lives (Honneth, 2002).

Simmel individuated a tragic characteristic of modern culture: the tendency to objectify any form of subjective instance, that is the crystallization of some forms of that “subjective Spirit”, and the incapacity to gather and recognize these forms as own. These objective forms (which are originally values in a transactional/relational context) inexorably become “norms” for new individuals. The inextricable conflicting panorama between norms and values, such as Habermas then elaborated, was already *in nuce* in Simmel’s reflections.

In conclusion, maybe just paraphrasing a famous Habermas’ motto, the future for the relational sociology could really be “thinking with Simmel and against Simmel”: focussing on some central issues in Simmel’s relational theory to investigate the modern “forms” of social life and relations.

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