



Introduction. Simmel In/On Love

Paulina Sabugal and Swen Seebach

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PAULINA SABUGAL AND SWEN SEEBACH

Introduction. Simmel In/On Love

Simmel belongs without doubt among the classics of sociology. He dedicated his academic efforts to the foundation of sociology as a discipline and to the exploration and understanding of society at the beginning of the 20th century. With his unique approach he established both what we know as formal and as relational sociology. Formal sociology because he approached the analysis of society via social forms, relational sociology because he understood society as a web of social bonds and strings, of reciprocal actions and effects (Simmel, 2009: 26). As a sociologist, Simmel explored different forms, objects, and relations in society. Although his last works date back more than a century, his production continues to be of great value when engaging with contemporary questions in our social universe, and offers the reader a chance to discover answers to and potential perspectives on current social affairs and phenomena.

An important part of Simmel's works elaborates on a deeper understanding of society and the conditions that make society fundamentally possible (Simmel, 2009; Cantó-Milà, 2019), especially those social forms which he called social apriorities in reference to the same concept used by Immanuel Kant and authors that in the era of Simmel showed renewed interest in Kant, and which became a central focus of interest for him. Simmel believed that the existence of certain social forms was a necessary condition for

society to exist and to be sustained. He believed also that in order to understand society, these form(al) conditions should be explored.

However, we should not be deceived by the literal meaning of the term apriorities. As a relational sociologist, Simmel understood that social forms were necessary but that they were also subject to change. When defining special social forms, Simmel left space for potential changes in the appearance of these forms and the specific contents of those forms due to shifts in social history, the material conditions upon which society is or might be built and the potential emergence and integration of new strings and ties to society.

Despite Simmel's interest in those very fundamental forms in society, his work also covers a range of analyses of other social relations, objects and social forms from a sociological and later on philosophical perspective. However, within these explorations social forms are of a special importance, as it is those forms that shape and mould the ways we socially relate with each other and it is by them that "individuals are able to become a society in the first sense" (Simmel, 2009: 26).

The specific points of departure that Simmel uses as starting points for his intellectual journeys are usually chosen in order to point out important mechanisms at work in society. Thanks to his relational perspective, with which he systematically explores the network of all possible relations, Simmel becomes able to pull different social strings in order to look at society as a whole, and from different angles (Lichtblau, 1986).

To analyse different social forms, relations and objects in society, Simmel developed a method of sociological exploration and analysis that started from conceptual pairs, in which two elements, objects or relations mark the outer limits of a continuum in which potential thirds are situated that might but should not be the consequence of a dialectical relationship between the two extremes (for a discussion of the question as to whether Simmel's form of thinking might be

considered dialectical, see Pyyhtinen, 2009, 2017, and Cantó-Milà, 2020). By opening social explorations that situate his inquiries in the midst of conceptual pairs, Simmel is able not only to point out the fundamentally relational character of society but also to spatialise complicated social questions and to position different social phenomena within a mapped out universe that represents society. We can find pair conceptualisations in his work on specific objects such as bridge and door, in the concepts of subjective and objective culture, in the concept of more life and more than life (which he seems to relate to Marx's dialectical concepts of basis and superstructure and explores an alternative reading) and in the concepts of quantity and quality that are to be found in almost all his works. As we will show, Simmel employed the same method when engaging with love in his text *Love. A Fragment*, to which we will come back later.

Throughout his career, Simmel understood that the role of a sociologist is not only to gain a deeper understanding of society as such but to also answer urgent social questions and to explore social phenomena in such a way that they would become accessible to a wider public. Simmel wrote regularly on contemporary issues of his time. The transformation of intimate relationships and the role of women in a rapidly modernising society called for further exploration. Although controversial, Simmel's work on women and sexuality can provide some useful insights into the way society was transformed at the beginning of the 20th century. A vast amount of his texts concern women, sexuality and love. An essay "On the Psychology of Women" appeared in 1890, followed by brief newspaper pieces and popular journal articles on the women's movement in 1892, 1894 and 1896. A newspaper piece on "The Role of Money in the Relations between the Sexes" appeared in 1898. Two years later, these ideas were incorporated into "The Philosophy of Money", in which he included a discussion on the monetary valuation of women, marriage and prostitution. A preliminary sketch of his text "Female Culture" appeared in 1902.

This was followed by some remarks on the psychology of women, notes on the ideal of a philosophy of love, and a preliminary version of the essay “Flirtation”.

Whilst some ideas discussed within these texts are intellectual bridges, other ideas are highly questionable and rather remain as closed doors. However, this means neither that the texts on women and on love are directly related to each other nor that a Simmelian reading of romantic love from a postmodern or a critical feminist perspective is impossible or by definition wrong. Looking at the complex presentation of love in various essays and texts we gain an intriguing insight into Simmel’s multi-faceted approach to his work on love. Simmel’s work on women allows, when approached from a critical perspective, the questioning of hidden forms of being and having that run through love relationships, and provides a solid basis for a reflection on a variety of emotional reactions and culturally learned treatments that place men over women.

Love can cover a wide spectrum of different social relationships that embrace certain forms of family relationships, kinship, friendship, relationships of couples, and human-animal relationships. However, Simmel did not settle only on one specific form of love, just as he did not provide a coherent definition of love. Love has become, with money and intellect, the other important dimension of our lives in later modernity. This is an importance discussed in a wide array of sociological (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2018, Illouz, 1997, 2007, 2012, Seebach, 2017) and feminist literature (Hochschild, 2003, Jonasdóttir, 2014) that engages with love as a relevant social object.

In order to explore Simmel’s specific interest in love during his later period and to better understand the value of his work in a contemporary analysis of love we will take a closer look at the way he pictured love and the changes introduced in the analysis of love in his later writings.

In his main work, *Sociology*, love appears in the chapter dedicated to the Dyad (2009: 85), in the chapter on second order forms as an emotion that can be shaped and prolonged by faithfulness, and in a subchapter on Types of Social Relationships. Quite in contrast to his theory of desire and the definition of love as a satisfaction of such a desire that rather reminds one of Plato, here Simmel seems to draw, at least partially, on Aristotle's work. This becomes especially clear when he discusses love (besides friendship) as one of those special social relationships in which an individual gets involved in its totality (Simmel, 1950: 325). Rather like Aristotle, Simmel concludes that friendship is "more apt than love to connect a whole person with another person in its entirety" (Simmel, 1950: 325) because of the minor importance of passion and sexual interest. Or, as Aristotle expressed it: "Now those who love each other for their utility do not love each other for themselves but in virtue of some good which they get from each other. So too with those who love for the sake of pleasure; it is not for their character that men love ready-witted people, but because they find them pleasant". (Aristotle, 2019: 143)

What people search for, in love as much as in friendship, is a recognition of the self by the other. In this chapter, Simmel seems to foreground some of the ideas that would later enter into his unfinished essay. However, in *Sociology* Simmel's perspective on love is primarily shaped by his understanding of love as volatile and unstable, which comes through clearly in his reflections about love in the second order form chapter of *Sociology* (Simmel, 2009: 518).

In the text "On Love. A Fragment", love gained a much more central position than in his earlier writings. It seems as if Simmel's engagement with a philosophy of life was influential in his renewed interest for love and most probably the social and material circumstances that reshaped social bonding at the beginning of the 20th century (Seebach, 2015) also influenced Simmel's new interpretation of love.

Simmel's focus on life from a philosophical perspective during a later phase of his life moved love into a much more foreground position. In fact, we can understand the role of love if we apply the previously discussed method of pairing different social phenomena as opposed extremes in order to explore the field of society and consequent social relations between them. In *Love. A Fragment*, love appears as the other extreme to biological, egoistic and individualist life (Simmel, 1984: 169, 166). Besides a will to life, driven by biological/material characteristics of human beings, and individualist, egoistic desires, love is another potential objective for life, an objective so strong that it can, under certain circumstances, relegate life to a means. Love can serve as an end to life in a way that life becomes secondary, that the self becomes secondary and that the bond to the other turns into what matters most. In *On Love. A Fragment*, Simmel opens up a new analytical perspective on the modernity that he described throughout his lifetime.

For lovers, to have love can turn into something stronger than being alive. Or, to express this in completely opposite terms, we are in possession of our lives but we might sacrifice this possession by handing it to our lover. It is in this sense that love turns into the other important protagonist (besides money/intellect) in second modernity. In popular thought people perceive love as the opposite to money, as it is love that might suspend, at least temporarily, our urge towards individualist cost-benefit calculating thinking.

While modern life usually appears in Simmel's writings as being shaped by money and intellect, by cost-benefit calculating, rational thought, of individualistic metropolitans, his text on love opens up the potential form of an emotional, altruistic and self-less modern life where those ends can be turned into means again and where singular, qualitative characteristics outweigh quantities and processes of unlimited accumulation. An exploration of the relationship between a life driven by money and a life driven by love as seen through Simmel's lens is definitely interesting.

It is clear that love and life might but must not oppose each other. However, in their purest forms they are almost opposed. Between these extremes a series of potential combinations becomes possible. In fact, late modern life takes place between self-interest and love, intertwining both in productive and less productive forms. Illouz (2007) and Zelizer (2007) have shown in completely different ways how late modern life combines money with love.

This short reflection enables us to discover in *Love. A Fragment* important building blocks of Simmelian thought, such as the exploration of relevant social forms and the exploration of the social in the form of paired objects that as extremes create a space of analysis. Furthermore, we rediscover typical Simmelian topics such as the relation between being and having, between quality and quantity and the implied value judgements that provide orientation and meaning to different positions in the spectrum of possible forms of living.

If we take a step further and apply Simmel's analysis of love to contemporary society, we are able to analyse, for instance, the role of love in everyday lives and management of the current bio-emergency which has been consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. For many, a main factor for action or inaction, for preventing infections, self-distancing and self-sacrifice was not only been an individual will for survival but the love for specific others. People cared for their beloved sick in their homes, people overlooked restrictions and potential risks to their lives in order to be with their partners, people sacrificed physical contact in order to protect their beloved. Love is an essential factor in how people dealt with the pandemic. Appropriate research is still lacking, but it is clear that life and love did not always pair up in the process of dealing with COVID-19. Analysing love with a Simmelian analysis in times of COVID and the despair of those without love when it has been almost impossible to find love is definitely a valuable exercise. Love

is difficult in times of crisis, when we search for a partner at *The End of the Fucking World* (Netflix, 2019).

A Simmelian reading of contemporary life/love would probably also look at the increasingly individualist, digitised (Illouz, 2007, Seebach, 2013, Bergström, 2021) and very interestingly much more functionalist, cost-benefits calculating approach to love, especially as applied by today's youth. Maybe this is a sign, maybe the dynamics of money wins over those of love after all, or maybe we will just discover a new position between these two structuring elements of modern societies.

How is it possible to fall in love in times of pandemic, isolation and scarce social contact? How does technology “help” in the construction/deconstruction of love? How have gender roles been reconfigured in today's love relationships? What is the role of love in today's society? In this special issue of *Simmel Studies* on love, sociologists and anthropologists explore these and other questions by bringing into play various Simmelian concepts such as cultural forms, forms of socialisation, and individuality.

Couple relationships, the traditional family, flirtation and gender roles have been modified and reinvented as a result of various changes undergone by the society in which we live today. Social phenomena such as migration, the growing prominence of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the recent global health crisis have undoubtedly had an impact on love relationships. However, such changes have often been ignored or little studied by social scientists, who ignore the emotional sphere of social actors and omit the new possibilities and configurations of love that exist or could exist.

By considering love as a social category, it is possible to analyse increasingly remarkable phenomena such as love and its relationship with the increase in the flow of female migration. The authors Maria Catarina Chitolina Zanini and Cláudia Samuel Kessler delve into

this topic in their article *Simmel, love and the foreigner: is love between borders a love without limits?*, as well as Rebecca Chiyoko King-O’Riain in her text *Loving the Stranger: Mixed Couples and Mixed Emotions*. In both texts it is possible to appreciate how marriages that are the result of migration for love or marriage - and couples considered mixed - are a kind of micro laboratory that allows us to explore and discuss dynamics of exclusion, discrimination, racism and integration, as well as to reflect on hegemonic narratives and identity discourses.

By approaching the topics of love and mobility, mixed couples, intercultural marriage and marriage migration from Simmel’s perspective it is possible to clearly observe the so-called “cultural forms” that influence or have influenced the current imaginary of love and the “forms of socialisation” that are created within this framework of love and migration. Such an approach also enriches and deepens the discussion on modern love and the market of affections in a globalised world by reviewing marriage, family, sexuality and gender roles.

There is an imaginary around the theme of love. Literature, philosophy and cinema, among others, have been busy creating and reproducing ideals around love through their different cultural products. Simmel affirms that love belongs to the great configuring categories of the existing, that is to say that the subject who expresses that which is recognised as love constructs a type of loving reality. However, it is necessary to update this imaginary, which sometimes seems to have stopped at the romantic love of the late eighteenth century. Romanticism has constructed a unique idea and representation of love based on the values that identified the traditional family as a social ideal and in which Eros is something that can only be lived outside marriage. This is demonstrated, for example, by the literature of courtly love, which is basically an apology for infidelity.

Despite the growing discussion around the imposition of gender roles, new feminist movements such as “Ni una menos” (Not one-woman-less), the thousands of possibilities offered by technology to meet people through platforms like *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Twitter*, role-playing games like *Second Life* and dating apps like *Tinder*, *Happn* and *Bumble*, it seems that since 1750 we have lived in a quite distinctive era in the history of love: romanticism.

Romanticism emerged as an ideology in Europe in the mid-17th century, in the minds of poets, artists and philosophers, and eventually ended up conquering the whole world. Although many modern relationships do not follow the formats dictated by romanticism, it remains an ideal to pursue in today’s love relationships. Representations of romantic love through songs, poems, films, theatre, novels and images mean more to Western thought than just a poetic form. And nowadays we can add to these representations what is seen through social media: pictures of two lovers declaring their love for each other on the beach, dreamy vacations and perfect smiles and bodies that demonstrate what “true love” should look like. Such representations set in motion the idea of love as beginning and end, as the meaning of life.

For example, romanticism is extremely optimistic about marriage (De Botton, 2006). Romanticism took marriage (until then seen as a practical and emotionally temporary union) and merged it with passion, thus creating something unique: a union that will last forever. In this way, romanticism united two things that did not always come together: love and Eros. Indeed, romanticism placed sex in the position of “the ultimate expression of love”. In that sense, the ideal of romantic love has been a disaster for relationships and the emotional life of its subjects because it is never “up to the fantasy” and as soon as signs of disagreement or difference between couples are manifested, it is said that love is “in crisis”.

Accordingly, it is necessary to create a post-romantic theory for couples that does not situate all expectations, myths and fantasies on the same level (Herrera Gómez, 2011). In modern culture, the ephemeral is becoming established as a constant form of experience. Simmel points out how this condition can lead to a redefinition of the forms of marriage, “[...] and even to new forms of partnership, which today no one can suspect, let alone prophesy” (Simmel, 1986: 119).

Through the eyes of different social science scholars from different parts of the world who have dealt with the subject of love and society, it has been possible to highlight, in this special issue of *Simmel Studies*, the scope and depth of his proposal on love, specifically the love of a couple, more than 100 years after its first appearance.

Undoubtedly, the transformation of amorous expectations varies radically from the time and environment in which Simmel wrote. However, this variation not only depends on the time in which we live but also relates to geographical-cultural, gender and class aspects. Undoubtedly, Simmel, as a sociologist and philosopher ahead of his time in speaking and discussing gender, family, eroticism and love, was destined to endure in the framework of new research dealing with love, new ways of relating and various ways in which it is possible today to create intimate and loving bonds.

For example, in her article *The Female Absolute and the Relative Male. The Gender Relations according to Georg Simmel*, Adele Bianco explores an aspect that Simmel was particularly interested in among his studies on love: gender relations and the image of women. For Bianco, Simmel makes a reading that at first glance might seem “old-fashioned” or “macho” and yet, after careful analysis, makes the woman appear as an absolute. From this analysis of “woman” as a total category, Bianco explores a very current theme in today’s love relationships: the relationship between man and woman. This

aspect, inevitably, makes us think of classical feminist theories and how they have now been reintroduced by new generations in different parts of the world and how this revolution in men's and women's thinking has had an undeniable impact on couple relationships. Bianco, however, makes an observation that could appear risky. The author says: "women have improved their social position, families are plural, homosexual love is recognized and accepted, and the most varied erotic practices and sexual behaviours are free from proscription". However, if we make an intersectional analysis in which race, class and gender come into play, we still find women marginalised by society itself, plural families that are not considered as such by the State, as well as homosexual, polyamorous or "free love" relationships that suffer from social bias and are far from being free from proscription. It should not be forgotten how the legal sphere constitutes a relevant reference to determine how a society represents, through its laws and codes, expectations regarding women, gender relations, the idea of family and, of course, legitimately accepted love.

Massimo Cerulo delves into Simmel's "forms of socialisation" and focuses on the tragic dimension of love as it constructs and deconstructs a social bond. In his text *Simmel, the emotions and the tragic nature of the love bond*, the author affirms that while the differentiation and individuality that characterise modernity are necessary for the affirmation of love, they also constitute its insurmountable limit. In this contradiction lies the irresolvable tragedy of love, which drowns in the fusion of two individualities but is caught up in an unbridgeable distance. However, the question arises: why should this condition of love be seen as tragic? In this sense it is worth reviewing the classical definition of the term that dates back to Greek theatre and describes tragedy as man facing an adverse fate, i.e. man versus cosmos. The ultimate goal was catharsis *κάθαρσις* (*katharsis*) which meant purification. Such purification was achieved through representing ideas and emotions that were relegated in the

unconscious of the individual. However, this representation of love in which man struggles against his fate is again reminiscent of the idea of romantic love. “Oh, I am fortune’s fool” says Romeo in the first scene of Act 3 in William Shakespeare’s famous play *Romeo and Juliet* to imply that Romeo believes he is being used for the gods’ entertainment, like a fool in a royal court. An impossible love that has overcome obstacles seems to be more valid than a love that comes “easily”. The love story in a certain way is “purified” when it moves away from Eros and approaches the platonic.

In his splendid text *Eros and Modernity: Georg Simmel On Love*, Guy Oakes reviews Simmel’s analysis of Goethe’s novel *Elective Affinities* (*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*), published at the beginning of the 19th century, and presents the basic concepts on which Simmel worked in several of his texts on love. Individuality, reciprocity, immediacy and radicalism are the basic conditions for Simmel to consider a union as “absolute love” as happens with Eduard and Ottilie, protagonists of the story. The beloved one is, ideally, unique and irreplaceable. “I love you because you are you and no one else”. However, modernity today offers us endless possibilities to love and be loved. There are new models of relationships beyond monogamy, and being in a couple is no longer the only way of understanding love.

Love, and the institutions that protect it (marriage, family, Catholic Church) are strongly rooted in the structure of a capitalist and neoliberal system in which having a loving relationship depends on the economic and political conditions of the subjects (Illouz, 2012). As Marx and Engels stated in 1884: “the family is a central institution for the development of capitalism”. In this regard, Marx (1998: 94-95) wrote:

The modern family contains in germ not only servitus (slavery) but also servitude, since it is linked beforehand to agricultural services. It is the miniature of all the antagonists that unfold later in society and its State (...) the monogamous family always

presupposes, in order to be able to exist autonomously isolated, a class of servants who originally were everywhere directly slaves.

Marx also states that the accumulation of wealth is “inevitably linked with the monogamous family, once there is private ownership of houses, land, herds”. In fact, as indicated in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, this represented the starting point of history as the “history of the class struggle” (Marx, 1998: 180).

In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, a book defined by its author as “the execution of a testament” and intended to be “a modest substitute” in which his friend, Engels completed the analysis made by Marx, in the *Anthropological Notebooks*, by affirming that monogamy represented the (Engels, 1973: 121) Engels completed the analysis carried out by Marx, in the *Anthropological Notebooks*, affirming that monogamy represented the:

Enslavement of one sex by the other, as the proclamation of a conflict between the sexes, unknown until then in prehistory. In an old unpublished manuscript, written in 1848 by Marx and myself, I find this sentence: “The first division of labour is that between man and woman for the procreation of children”. And today I can add: the first class antagonism that appeared in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamy; and the first class oppression, with that of the female sex by the male. Monogamy (...) is the cellular form of civilized society, in which we can already study the nature of the contradictions and antagonisms that reach their full development in this society (Engels, 1973: 168).

Love and capitalism have forged an effective alliance throughout history in relation to governance and to establishing the politics in which love can and should be conducted (D’Aoust, 2013a). The idea of a satisfying love has to do with the laws of market and

consumption. As a consequence, this leads to the reflection that love is not accessible to all the individuals who compose a society. Therefore, love can have a future only when it is under a capitalist optic, that is to say, it is based on an equality not only of class, but of geographical, political, cultural and social circumstances that translate into the same cultural, social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 2003) and even a shared erotic capital (Hakim, 2011).

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