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Abstract

This paper argues for a sociological and relational concern of "gratitude" in Simmel's thought as a key feature of human interaction as well as a key "emotive disposition" (*Stimmung*) to engage with the challenges of modern society. Georg Simmel is undoubtedly one of the most crucial theorists and a pillar in the social sciences, and his theoretical contribution also stands as the foundation of relational sociology *stricto sensu*. He taught that interactions supporting social processes must be investigated as forms of relations. A relation is a precise mode of being connected to others; it is a tie emerging from reciprocal action and acquires its consistency by generating causal effects on involved actors. Among his main insights within the sociological tradition, Simmel's excellent concepts and arguments engage emotions as a sociological matter, that is, under a relational aspect. Not only do emotions have sociological relevance (that is, they are a worthy subject for sociologists), but they also characterize the precise manner of interaction among individuals. Emotions are the relational effect of being associated in an increasingly differentiated society, which apparently only neutralizes individuals' emotive sides, or else instrumentally drives or "colonizes" them. Simmel explored gratitude as a particular emotion that is a form of relation and interaction: it has an eccentric position among the other emotions that he investigated in his many essays. Gratitude represents a non-symmetrical or economic (exchangeable) "transactive" emotion: it puts the giver and receiver in a peculiar socio-emotional form of reciprocity. By considering relations, emotions, and gratitude through rigorous textual exploration, this paper tackles Simmel's view and challenges a globalized world and hybridized digital society. Finally, gratitude could be regarded as a demarcation criterion for identifying and distinguishing social interaction forms from other kinds of non-social processes or transactions.

Keywords

Simmel; relational sociology; emotions; gratitude

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Dar las gracias a Georg Simmel. Emociones, gratitud y la preocupación relacional de la sociología en la sociedad globalizada

Resumen

Este artículo aboga por una preocupación sociológica y relacional de la «gratitud» en el pensamiento de Simmel como una característica clave de la interacción humana, así como una «disposición emocional» clave (Stimmung) para responder a los desafíos de la sociedad moderna. Georg Simmel es, sin duda, uno de los teóricos más importantes y un pilar en las ciencias sociales, y su contribución teórica también es la base de la sociología relacional stricto sensu. Nos enseñó que las interacciones que respaldan los procesos sociales deben investigarse como formas de relaciones. Una relación es un modo preciso de estar conectado con los demás; es un vínculo que surge de la acción recíproca y adquiere su coherencia generando efectos causales en los actores involucrados. Entre sus principales aportaciones dentro de la tradición sociológica, los brillantes conceptos y argumentos de Simmel consideran las emociones como un asunto sociológico, es decir, bajo un aspecto relacional. Las emociones no solo tienen una relevancia sociológica (es decir, son un tema importante para los sociólogos); también caracterizan la forma precisa de interacción entre las personas. Las emociones son el efecto relacional de estar asociado en una sociedad cada vez más diferenciada, que aparentemente solo neutraliza el lado emotivo de las personas, o de otro modo las impulsa o «coloniza» instrumentalmente. Simmel exploró la gratitud como una emoción particular, que es una forma de relación e interacción: tiene una posición excéntrica entre las otras emociones que investigó en sus muchos ensayos. La gratitud representa una emoción «transactiva» no simétrica o económica (intercambiable): sitúa al que da y al que recibe en una forma socioemocional peculiar de reciprocidad. Al considerar las relaciones, las emociones y la gratitud a través de una rigurosa exploración textual, este artículo aborda la visión de Simmel y cuestiona un mundo globalizado y una sociedad digital hibridada. Por último, la gratitud podría considerarse un criterio de demarcación para identificar y distinguir las formas de interacción social de otros tipos de procesos o transacciones no sociales.

Palabras clave

Simmel; sociología relacional; emociones; gratitud

1. Georg Simmel: sociology as “the science of relations”

In recent decades, there has been growing sociological interest in emotions: they now represent a particular field within the social sciences. Moreover, emotions have been increasingly regarded as a sociological matter (Stets & Turner, 2006; Bericat, 2015; Neckel & Pritz, 2019; Cerulo & Rafele, 2021). Sociological studies on emotions have been fundamental to understanding the “social nature of human emotions”: carrying out sociological analyses of several emotions (love, trust, fear, pain, and so on) has made possible their investigation in many social fields (basically comparing emotions with institutions, work, gender, and so on). This paper aims to tackle the matter of emotions in the social sciences; it adopts a relational perspective and mediates this topic through Simmel's sociological theory.

Georg Simmel is undoubtedly one of the most crucial theorists and a pillar in the social sciences (Fitzi, 2018; Thouard, 2020; Bohr *et al.*, 2021). Between the late 19th and early 20th century, his theoretical views and personality were decisive for the foundation of sociology as an autonomous science within the *humanities*. Simmel advocated for new inquiry into the social realm under the categories of *Wechselwirkung* (“interaction”) and *Vergesellschaftung* (“association”). While the first concept represents the dynamic aspect of individuals' being-together and their interactive attributes (the reciprocal effect arises from the need to interact, which is a

quasi-innate and ancestral human drive), the second is the social fact given under a form. *Vergesellschaftung* is literally the socializing emergence of a form, which embodies manifold contents (some examples of *Vergesellschaftungsformen* given by Simmel are under and over-ordination, concurrence, imitation, and so on). From an epistemological and ontological viewpoint, Simmel adopted the typical Kantian and Neo-Kantian scheme, dividing forms from contents of knowledge process and the social realm (emphasizing the form as the core concept to grasp and edify sociological subjects and investigations).

As Olli Pyyhtinen rightly states in his volume *The Simmelian Legacy. A Science of Relations* (Pyyhtinen, 2018), Simmel's contribution must be read as a dual attempt to find an autonomous space for sociology as science (among the humanities) and to claim its intimate relational vocation: “Simmel cultivates a *relational mode of thought* by examining phenomena in and through relations. Simmel develops a sociology suggesting the priority of relations against the overly substantialist perspectives that still populate many strands of sociology today” (Pyyhtinen, 2018). This assumption is indeed widely shared by several scholars (Ruggieri, 2017; Papilloud, 2018; Cantó-Milà, 2005; 2018).

Simmel has recognized in relations (he used many terms to characterize them: *Beziehungen*; *Wechselwirkungen*; *Relationen*; *Wechselbeziehungen*, *Verhältnisse*) the very “stuff” of the social realm. In the remarks of Robert Park, who attended Simmel's academic course in WS 1899-1900 (*Sociologie – mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Staatsformen*), we often find the metaphor of “weaving” – Simmel explicitly talks about *Stoff*, *der Stoff der Gesellschaft* – in order to characterize the realm of social events. More precisely, Simmel advocated that the space (*Gebiet*) and tasks

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(*Aufgabe*) of social science, by sustaining that sociology and abstracting forms from the contents of interaction among individuals, must deal precisely with “forms of social life”:

“Erst hiermit ist beschrieben, was einer Gesellschaft wirklich Gesellschaft ist. Gesellschaft hat zwei Bedeutungen: einmal ist es der Komplex der Individuen, das gesellschaftlich geformte Menschenmaterial, die Summe der Menschen. Dann ist Gesellschaft aber auch die Summe der Beziehungsformen, vermöge deren aus den Individuen die Gesellschaft im vorigen Sinne wird [...]” *Die Soziologie betrachtet die Formen* (Simmel, 2012a, pp. 284-285).

Epistemologically speaking, sociology must investigate forms of associations, while from a socio-ontological viewpoint, the dynamic relationship of *Wechselwirkung* is the main category that relates precisely subject and object in a procedural, interactive, and open logic, which is detectable in certain forms of society and culture (Köhnke, 1996, pp. 480-ff.). In this regard, Simmel gave operative instructions for considering relations as interactions within social processes, as well as a tool for detaching an interactive *niveau* between society and culture. This core idea recurs in all sociological and cultural-philosophical writing, and it also becomes functional in Simmel's late philosophy and sociology of life.

(Social) life is treated by Simmel as a relational phenomenon: there is no static definition of life without referring to the conceptual (and ontological) “relation” category. What Simmel meant by “life” (and “social life”) is best described in his later 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 which 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 God's eye perspective of each absolutely self-subsistent categorial world – and being itself composed 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, 2012b, p. 247).

A wide theory of life in its immanent/transcendent nature was finally provided by Simmel in his last published work *Lebensanschauung* (1918), in which he joined socio-cultural, philosophical, and vitalist interests in a coherent philosophy and sociology of life (Fitz, Mele & Magatti, 2018).

From the very beginning – I refer to the first systematic sociological writing *Über soziale Differenzierung* (1890) – Simmel regarded social ontology as the *mise en forme* of the interactive character of human being-together, as well as conceiving social epistemology (*soziale Erkenntnistheorie*) as the claim of separating “forms” from “contents” within social processes. Forms of interactions are given in a relational frame: that is, we cannot understand “forms” of interaction without assuming their proper autonomous dimension. According to Simmel, sociology is a *thick* science because it has a *relational gaze* (he considered sociology as a “second order” science or a science “to the nth degree”) on the increasingly complex processes within modernity (and not for the fact it discovered a “new matter”). Having a *relational gaze* means that any sociologist should assume the social matter by adapting, adopting, and

conforming to the necessarily intertwined character of social life. No static facts are given in social forms (such as Durkheim and any positivistic approach offered); they are always the result of an interactive and mutual process among individuals, and this statement will have many essential consequences with regard also to Simmel's view on *culture*. Even emotions are given by Simmel under specific forms, particularly in recognizable manifold fields of the arts (pictorial, literal, musical, and so on). This conviction is testified to in many essays that Simmel wrote on art, artist personalities, and artworks, as well as on literature and writers. The emotive sphere that is given form through art is surely an eccentric argument in Simmel's work (Meyer, 2017).

2. Relations, forms, emotions

Simmel's sociological theory and his approach have provided his contemporaries and scholars with the keys to understanding not only social and cultural processes in the frame of modernity, but also interesting insights into a new style of inquiring and writing. Sociology has been recognized as a “fragmentary” science due to the inner character of its ontological subject: the more fragmentary the character of modern (social) life, the more it is necessary to conceive a social science that fits with this absolutely new aspect of human agency (Simmel, 2012b). Simmel's style of thinking and writing – unsystematic, fragmentary, undisciplined (Axelrod 1977; Frisby 1985) – represents indeed a new rationality, a new “intellectual sensitivity” (this formula sounds like an oxymoron, but it is the very core of Simmel's style) due to modern life.

This idea of the fragmentary character of social life is functional to a *relational* programme for the social sciences as well as for a *relational* paradigm (epistemology and ontology of relations): it does not mean that it should necessarily be regarded as a weak science, nor that it is a relativistic science *tout court*. Regarding this aspect, Amat asserts that, in a sociological context, *relationism* in Simmel's sense stands for *relativism* (see Amat, 2018). On the contrary, I argue that the *relations* represent the ontological substrate of the social realm; they are the social realm (on this topic, see Donati, 2011). Social relations *are* society. This proposition has an epistemological and ontological validity in Simmel's writings; from the Introduction to *Über soziale Differenzierung* (1890) to the first chapter (and *Excursus: wie ist Gesellschaft möglich?*) to *Soziologie* (1908), and also to *Grundfragen der Soziologie* (1917), the fundamental idea that sociology must treat forms of relations and association (*Beziehungsformen; Formen der Vergesellschaftung*) is highly coherent and recurrent (in this regard, see Ruggieri, 2017, 2021).

This attention to the *formal* aspect of society and socialization processes fits with the interpretation of modernity according to Simmel's philosophy of history. Modernity is the path towards a gradual and progressive “intellectualization” of spiritual life. This idea is stated in *Philosophy of Money* (1900), where Simmel asserts that money represents the maximum abstract factor in triggering engagement in modern life due to its differentiated and complex character. Our disposition to exchange and interact with others depends on our modern *monetary* existence: that is, our disposition to relate to others in an absolute manner (exactly as money does, as a universal means, with all goods). Simmel is alleged to have

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found this idea in *Kant. Sechzehn Berliner Vorlesungen* (1904), as he viewed Kant (particularly his epistemological and ontological theory of *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*) as the supreme philosopher who synthesized a particular philosophy (abstract/rational/conceptual) with a wide philosophy of culture and anthropology (the human being as *animal culturalis*, and more precisely as an “abstractive animal”). In *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche* (1907), Simmel also furnished the definition of the inner character of humanity as “indirect essence” (*indirekte Wesen*), in order to corroborate his idea that only mankind needs to interact with the environment and others through a multiple chain of objectified means: the more modernity moves forwards, the more the network of means increases. This aspect deals directly with the abstraction and intellectualization of life. According to Simmel, Kant represents the peak of the modern parabola, which assumes humanity as the only beings constructing, living, and (trans)acting with the world through their own capacity for conceptualization: human beings embrace the complexity of the realm of intellectual categories by virtue of intellect, which is metaphorically represented in Simmel’s work by monetary power. This position is very close to Simmel’s interpretation of the modern life of individuals in metropolitan scenarios. As Cerulo and Rafele recently suggested:

“One of the main characteristics of modern everyday life is, in fact, an ‘intensification of nervous life’, a privileging, in everyday actions, of the use of the intellect (*Verstand*) – that more superficial faculty of the psyche, with its logical – combinatory character that allows individuals to manage multiple activities even simultaneously, adapting with ease and practicality to the frenetic rhythms of modernity – over reason (*Vernunft*) – that faculty of consciousness that gives the subject the possibility of reflecting on the world and giving it meaning, which therefore implies a confrontation with the emotions experienced” (Cerulo & Rafele, 2021, p. 82).

The essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903) surely represents a fundamental medium between *Philosophy of Money* and *Kant*. In *Metropolis*, Simmel sketches the main characteristics of the metropolitan type due to the “intensification of emotional life” given by “the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli” (Simmel, 1903, p.103).

Nevertheless, Simmel, as a kind of Pascal in the 20th century (basically sharing the assertion: “The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing”), is also persuaded that individuals are not only intellectual (formal) entities: they are always both *la tête et le coeur*. This means that, beyond the intellectual character of modernity, individuals are always intertwined with emotional and non-rational aspects, and the emotional side emerges in ever new ways of expression – and this occurs not only in private life, but also in the common modern life. In this regard, Simmel stands as a pioneer, because he regarded emotions in a sociological sense. He dealt with emotions and paid attention to them as no one had before and like no others among the sociological classics (Gerhard and Scheve 2018, p. 815). His sociological and cultural studies on love, shame, flirtation, jealousy, envy, gratitude, *blasé*, and desire have been enlightening new issues and inquiring fields for the social and cultural sciences. He particularly viewed social agency as strictly interwoven with cultural aspects, and the more society is differentiated (according to his formula for understanding modernity since his

former writing *Über soziale Differenzierung*), the more individuals are characterized by complex emotional and neurobiological motives. Nick Crossley recently offered interesting observations on the conceptualization of the relationship between structure and agency in the frame of a relational aspect, maintaining that:

“A society is not an aggregate of actors because actors interact, forging relations of interdependence. However, it is not an aggregate of actors and relations either. It is a structure that might be either diamond or graphite, so to speak, depending upon the pattern of its constitutive relations. Structure is *not autonomous* in this conception. It is a patterning of relations between interdependent actors; a *dependent structure of interdependencies*. It is sociologically important because its constitutive patterns affect both the actors embedded in it and the social processes which play out across it” (Crossley, 2021, p. 4).

To return to Simmel’s writings and sociological contents, in the Excursus “Wie ist die Gesellschaft möglich?” to the first chapter of *Soziologie* (1908), he explained his social epistemology according to three pivotal social a priori: in other words, “social” is possible according to three conditions (according to a typical Kantian epistemological frame). The first social a priori is represented by otherness: in the “eyes of others”, we are always a performer bound to particular standards, roles, images, customs, and values (Erving Goffman and Symbolic Interactionists regarded this topic as a playset on a stage). The second – which is particularly interesting for our purposes – deals with the being-associated (*Vegeellschaftetsein*) conditions, which depend (as Simmel affirms) on our not-being associated (*Nicht Vergesellschaftetsein*). Simmel uses the formula *Außerdem* (“furthermore”) to identify a specific sphere that characterizes our ways of being associated with others: this sphere does not enter into transactive formal interaction, even if it is decisive for it. Our contents (*das Material*) in interaction (*Wechselwirkung*) relate to any psychological and emotive reason which triggers us to embrace a social process. Finally, the third condition is the *Beruf* concept, which is very close to the Weberian category and concerns our “position” in social spaces, so recalling the idea of vocation (we feel our place in society as a vocative answer to a broad interactive design).

According to Gerhards and Scheve, the emergence of a new science of emotions (*Emotionssoziologie*) is given by virtue of the (intensive) interactive character of modern society, and its task is the observation of the emotional sphere with regard to individual interactions (Gerhards & Scheve 2018, p. 816). Emotions could be viewed from two perspectives:

- 1) They are a peculiar form of *being-together* among two or more persons; thus, they are a form of interaction *in se*;
- 2) They are an objective form of the persistence of a feeling which assumes a proper value (a form of interaction *per se*). If the former meaning deals with an immanent character of interaction, the latter treats emotions as “cultural” products, thus as forms of new (possible) forms of interaction. This second meaning regards emotions as a “product” of a *Zeitgeist*: that is, the sum of forms of a particular emotion in a historical context. Following Gerhards and Scheve, Simmel furnishes a “formal perspective of sociology of emotions” (*eine formale emotionssoziologische Perspektive*) in Simmel (Gerhards & Scheve, 2018, p. 818).

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Even if emotions are always given a form (which has a dynamic and historical character), they cannot be reduced to pure forms. The emotional and intellectual spheres are always intertwined: I would maintain that on this topic as well, Simmel is coherently a relational sociologist. Emotion and rationality relationally work: the more that intellectual life (that is the character of modernity) requires a “rationalization” of any aspect of the social realm, the more emotions will be engaged in the way remarked upon in *Philosophy of Money* (the need for exchangeability). In the frame of capitalist society, looking at Simmel, Hochschild asserted that our emotions are increasingly trapped in exchangeability mechanisms: a kind of “rationalization” or adjustment of them (Hochschild, 1979).

Moreover, Simmel sustains that the emotional and rational spheres are ever more “relationally” explainable within the modern context with regard to the formation of value itself. Any emotion or desire requires “distance”, and the achievement of modernity is the double (and paradoxical) character of direct access to the sensible-emotional sphere – and the possibility of a pure exchange of emotions and perceptions – on the one hand, and mere calculation-rationalization, on the other hand, which allows for the former. This mechanism is possible by virtue of the subjectivation/objectivation conditions of modern life:

“Now an object is not a value so long as it remains a mere emotional stimulus enmeshed in the subjective process - a natural part of our sensibility, as it were. It must first be separated from this subjective sensibility for it to attain the peculiar significance which we call value. For not only is it certain that desire in and of itself could not establish any value if it did not encounter obstacles - trade in economic values could never have arisen if every desire were satisfied without struggle or exertion - but even desire itself would never have ascended to such a considerable height if it could be satisfied without further ado. It is only the postponement of satisfaction through impediment, the anxiety that the object may escape, the tension of struggle for it, that brings about the cumulation of desires to a point of intensified volition and continuous striving” (Simmel, 2015, p. 95).

As Simmel once alleged in *Soziologie*, even “solitude” must be examined and viewed as a “relational issue” (Simmel, 1992 [1908], pp. 96-ff.). This conviction is enforced by Simmel in the same chapter on the quantitative determinacy of groups (in which he also tries to view solitude and freedom from the same perspective), when he argues – looking at the productive model of the society of the 19th century – that emotions (which are basically forms of “human needs”) are regarded in principle as incalculable and accidental (that is, non-rational). Emotions cannot be rationalized or exploited as goods within the productive system: this aspect is evocative of the recent *Resonanz* paradigm of Hartmut Rosa, particularly with the *Lebenswelt* and “good life” sphere, as something which cannot ever be “available”, that is *elusiveness* (*Unverfügbarkeit*) (Rosa 2016, 2020). Rosa argues that the quality of life (the question of “a good life”, looking at Adorno’s recall in *Minima moralia*) of human beings – and of social relations – cannot simply be regarded as a matter of options or resources; he finds that what is required is an investigation of the relations *within* the world by individualizing social pathologies or negative forms of relations which impede the flourishing of a good life. Rosa thus proposes that *resonance* is precisely “a way of encountering the world, that is people, things,

matter, history, nature and life as such”. Resonance consists of 4 main “patterns”:

- 1) af←fection (“we feel truly touched or moved by someone or something we encounter”);
- 2) e→motion (“we feel that we answer to this call, we react to it with body and mind”);
- 3) being touched and affected/reacting generates a *transformation*;
- 4) elusiveness (*Unverfügbarkeit*). Rosa finds in Simmel a basic referent who paves the way to a “Soziologie der Weltbeziehung” (also with regard to his sociological and philosophical contributions to the issue of emotions):

“Tatsächlich gilt Simmels Interesse in fast allen seinen Untersuchungen der Art und vor allem der Veränderung von Beziehungsformen und -qualitäten in sozialen Interaktionen, etwa dem Streit, der Konkurrenz, der Freundschaft oder dem Konflikt, aber auch im Verhältnis zu Artefakten (zu Kleidern und Möbeln, zu Arbeitsgeräten und Kunstgegenständen, zur Mode und zum Schmuck etc.), zu Naturdingen oder Landschaften und zu den eigenen Emotionen und Erfahrungen. Simmels Soziologie lässt sich daher mit Fug und Recht selbst schon als eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehungen deuten” (Rosa 2016, p. 557).

Emotions are always a tool giving us access to others and thus to the world: Cerulo remarked on the essential ambivalence of emotional aspects within social interactions. He proposes that emotions are a neuralgic side of any individual, which indeed compels us to go beyond their intrinsic singularity (Cerulo, 2017). This double aspect of emotions (they are both phenomenological and internal, but also outwards-facing) characterizes in Simmel the basis of social interaction (from an ontological viewpoint), and directly refers to the first sociological *a priori* (from an epistemological viewpoint).

3. Dankbarkeit: the key to challenging the globalized society

In *Transcending Modernity* (2021), Donati assumes that we are engaging in a “relational society” and argues that society is not a simple sum of relations, nor is it a pure space containing relationships: it is a relationship in itself (society does not “have relationships” but “is relationship”). From this perspective, the ontological relevance of social relations consists of the fact that they “can be viewed both as an element essential to the process of emergence and as an emergent (structural entity) in itself”. Donati does not admit to regarding relations as transactions, processes, networks, because they have a proper ontological *niveau*, which sociological inquiry must work on and investigate. Any approach reducing relations to transactions or processes is defined by Donati as reductionist or “relationist” (and not relational). This perspective is also maintained in terms of the *emotional* aspects of social relations: “The relational gaze is the triggering of a relationship that is responsive to sense perceptions and emotions, and thus to feelings, which constitute a commentary on its ultimate concerns; but it is certainly not passive. It is a complex activity triggered by a person’s relational reflexivity” (Donati 2021, pp. 62-67).

In 1907, Simmel published in the “Der Morgen” review his paper on gratitude with the title *Dankbarkeit. Ein soziologischer*

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Versuch (Simmel, 1997 [1907]). It is not unusual for Simmel to tackle a particular issue (such as gratitude) through a sociological lens: as witnessed during his academic career, he was persuaded that any aspect of social life dealing with interaction among individuals should have the right interpretation. This essay precedes the publication of his masterpiece *Soziologie*, which was released in 1908 and which contains a series of interesting topics dealing with the emotional sphere (excursus on secret, intimacy, senses, faithfulness, bad conduct in groups, gratitude).

Gratitude is an emotion with an eccentric position among others, because it works very differently from them. Even if one deals with "personal feelings and private agency" (*persönlichen Empfindens und privaten Handelns*), it hits the target of intersubjective social action (Simmel, 1997 [1907], p. 308). More precisely, according to Simmel, it arises from "interaction" among humans (*Wechselwirkung zwischen Menschen*) and is given to a modern context in which exchange has become the objectifying (*Sachwerdung*) of reciprocity (*Wechselwirkamseit*) among human beings (Simmel, 1997 [1907], pp. 308-309). This last proposition stands against the background given by Simmel since the publication of *Philosophy of Money* (1900): relationships among humans have become relationships among objects, due to the progressive character of modern life which requires individuals to be increasingly willing to be objectified (by virtue of the inner mechanism of modernity: exchangeability).

It has sociological relevance according to Simmel, because gratitude breaks the chains of pure exchange, establishing a new particular relationship among parts or individuals. Gratitude is neither regulated by norms of the market (it does not deal with material goods) nor is it subject to special needs or constraints. The pure form of gratuitousness lends a particular form of interdependence among individuals.

Simmel defines gratitude as the "moral memory of humanity" (*das moralische Gedächtnis der Menschheit*): it is like a "bridge" (a typical metaphor for social relations in Simmel's writings) which triggers association processes and provides a way to allow relationships to survive beyond the origins of its arising. It is very close to a "regulative principle" for two main reasons:

- 1) It is an "ideal survival of a relation" (*ein ideelles Fortleben einer Beziehung*) even if the poles of interaction are absent, that is, even if the giving and receiving of social interaction is concluded;
- 2) Gratitude is one of the greatest "binders" (*Bindemittel*) of society, as well as being "fertile ground for emotions" (*der fruchtbare Gefühlsboden*) (Simmel, 1997 [1907], pp. 309-310).

It is quite interesting that Simmel uses the term "*Bindemittel*", which is reminiscent of the term *Binden*, then to *Bindung* – they represent the very essence of the social dimension, the metaphorical glue that unites individuals. He also uses the metaphor "fertile ground", which reminds us of the "cultivating/culture" scenario (on this topic, I recall the metaphor given by Simmel in the preface of *Philosophische Kultur*). But how, precisely, does gratitude work from a sociological viewpoint? Simmel recalls the central mechanism

of gift/counter-gift to frame the nature of gratitude. Despite the exchange (metaphorical) mechanism of money, which is based on the capacity of things and performances to be levelled and measured (and thus to be exchanged in an *objective/objectified* system), gratitude works differently. To be grateful to a person implies the awareness *not* to be able to exchange and reciprocate the gift: in this regard, reciprocity does not mean "symmetry", because the engaged parts are "bound" in a particular way. Gratitude triggers an infinite process: this is why, according to Simmel, it deals with the "idea of an inner infinity of a relation".¹ In other words, once you are grateful to another person, you are "bound" to them through a multiple chain of relationships. Finally, gratitude has another precise aspect which differentiates it from other emotions: the *incommensurability* factor (*Inkommensurabilität*) (Simmel, 1997 [1907], p. 313). To Simmel, being grateful to others means that we are engaged with them in a way that overwhelms any kind of gift/counter-gift mechanism. It is a feeling of pure dependence which cannot be *exchanged* or fully returned. Being grateful to a friend, a colleague, a teacher, a parent, a child, and so on, means that we have received a (symbolic or metaphorical) gift which is not commensurable: it means etymologically that there are no "common measures" to equate what we received with what we could give. No money logic could exhaustively explain this mechanism, exactly as pure sociability (*Geselligkeit*) cannot be explained by the logic of symmetric exchange: they are pure (contingent) social play. As Simmel puts it, within the gratitude process the one who "gives" is purely unchained in regard to the duty mechanisms: what they do is simply free. Whoever receives a gift is placed in a situation that Simmel describes as "not reversible obligation" (*nicht zu solvierende Vepflichtichtung*) (Simmel, 1997 [1907], p. 314) because no one could reciprocate a free action (the original liberty [*Freiheit*] of the giver) with a duty (*Pflicht*). According to Simmel, gratitude finds a particular space among emotions because of its universal application and its *indelebilis* character:

"Haben wir erst einmal eine Leistung, ein Opfer, eine Wohltat angenommen, so kann daraus jene nie völlig auslöschbare Beziehung entstehen, weil die Dankbarkeit vielleicht der einzige Gefühlszustand ist, der unter allen Umständen sittlich gefordert und geliebt werden kann" (Simmel, 1997 [1907], p. 315).

In this passage, Simmel clarifies why the liberty of giving (basically, of gift) – the "proper indissoluble character of gratitude" (*des eigentümlich Unlösbares der Dankbarkeit*) – is immeasurably greater than the counter-gift (*Gegengabe*) (Simmel, 1997 [1907], p. 316). This aspect, which ideally ends this essay, is also a legacy for our society and culture.

Gratitude could indeed be considered as a demarcation criterion which permits us to claim what is still to be considered as *social*. We are immersed in a digital society and we find it a very difficult task to separate our life from social networks and digital devices. Sherry Turkle once highlighted how the increasing quantity of gadgets for keeping in touch with people does not necessarily mean that they

1. "Man kann sagen daß hier im tiefsten überhaupt nicht darin besteht, daß die Gabe erwidert wird, sondern in dem Bewußtsein, daß man sie nicht erwidern könne, daß nie etwas vorliegt, was die Seele der Empfangenden wie in einen gewissen Dauerzustand der anderen gegenüber versetzt, eine Ahnung der inneren Unendlichkeit eines Verhältnisses zum Bewußtsein bringt, das durch keine endliche Betätigung vollkommen erschöpft oder verwirklicht werden kann" (Simmel 1997 [1907], p. 313).

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increase our sociability (Turkle 2011, 2015). It deals, once again, with the inner ambivalence of modern life, to claim our (subjective) identities by depending on others (persons or networks) who are essentially opposed to us, or at least *étranger* for us. This works all the more in our “algorithmic” era.

In his famous article *Computing Machinery and Intelligence* (1950), Alan Turing wondered whether machines and humans would have been regarded as similar entities: “Can machines think?” is the epochal question posed in the first lines of his paper. He was far-sighted, as in the last lines of his paper he stated: “We may hope that machines will eventually compete with men in all purely intellectual fields” (Turing 1950, p. 460). In the 20th century, this challenge has become progressively pervasive and the key issue regarding relationships between humankind and machines, and more broadly between humans and technology. The question that is still relevant from a relational perspective is whether there is an ontological difference between humans and non-humans with regard to emotions. We are increasingly managing emotions and feelings through precise and thin formalized languages, as well as through software and digital programmes which can imitate and understand human behaviour.

This issue was recently relaunched by Luciano Floridi in his (edited) volume *The Onlife Manifesto. Being Human in a Hyperconnected Era* (2015). He explicitly invokes a removal of any distinction between humans and other new “actors”; in the first lines of his introduction, he alleges:

ICTs are not mere tools but rather environmental forces that are increasingly affecting:

- 1) our self-conception (who we are);
- 2) our mutual interactions (how we socialise);
- 3) our conception of reality (our metaphysics); and
- 4) our interactions with reality (our agency).

We are also convinced that the aforementioned impact exercised by ICTs is due to at least four major transformations:

- a) the blurring of the distinction between reality and virtuality;
- b) the blurring of the distinction between human, machine and nature;
- c) the reversal from information scarcity to information abundance; and
- d) the shift from the primacy of stand-alone things, properties, and binary relations, to the primacy of interactions, processes, and networks (Floridi 2015, p. 2).

We are fully immersed in a new sociological challenge due to the more pervasive relations between human and post-human (non-human) agents (Latour, 2005; Pyyhtinen, 2015). In *More than Human Society*, Pyyhtinen argues for “a more-than-human Sociology”, which invites us to “take seriously various non-human or not-only human materials and things as integral elements of our collectivities”. According to Pyyhtinen, society does not exist other than in material things and flows (Pyyhtinen, 2015, p. 63-ff.). He maintains that we must consider relations among beings, not reduce the primacy of humans to engaging in intentional action on the basis of introspective property. This theoretical position is highly persuasive. As many other sociologists have highlighted in the collective volume *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*

(Dépelteau, 2018), we can assign to relational sociology manifold meanings directly connected with meaning given to relation: this may be “process” (Dépelteau), “transaction” (Emirbayer, Tilly, and the New York School), “network” (Crossley), “reciprocity”, “interaction” or “communicative event” (Fuhse). All of these positions assume relation as “something else”, while Donati – on the contrary – has argued for considering relation as relation, claiming a strong socio-ontological assumption (from a critical realism perspective).

If we follow Simmel’s insights into the core ontological features of society, we find that he clearly regarded “interaction” (*Wechselwirkung*) as the ontological unit for sociological inquiry, and “forms of association” (*Vergesellschaftungsformen*) as the epistemological steering for his sociology. Interaction is always given as unity of form and content, even if sociologists must investigate only “forms”. In *Soziologie*, Simmel alleges:

“In any given social phenomenon, content and societal form constitute one reality. A social form severed from all content can no more attain existence than a spatial form can exist without a material whose form it is. Any social phenomenon or process is composed of two elements that in reality are inseparable: on the one hand, an interest, a purpose, or a motive; on the other, a form or mode of interaction among individuals through which, or in the shape of which, that content attains social reality” (Simmel, [1908] 2015, p. 69).

Society is not the mere sum of forms or of interactions, but rather it takes into account effects emerging from the reciprocal influence of individuals (through their actions):

It becomes a society only when the vitality of these contents attains the form of reciprocal influence; only when one individual has an effect, immediate or mediate, upon another, is mere spatial aggregation or temporal succession transformed into society (*ibidem*).

Simmel does not renounce a subjective *human* gaze regarding social relations: even if we are culturally intertwined in multiple “fragmented” worlds (art, literature, morals, and in a contemporary scenario in multicultural, digital, virtual, remote worlds, and so on), we still need the idea that a “form” of these relations is always given by a subject (or by *subjects*). The concept of subject or subjectivity is surely problematic and polysemantic for Simmel: it assumes different meanings with regard to a philosophical, sociological, or cultural viewpoint, but he commonly refers to it as an intentional self-conscious (reflexive, in modern terms) and interactive entity (see Helle, 2001, p. 175). Subjects are the ultimate terms of a social interaction even if they cannot steer or determine it. In *Der Begriff und die Tragödie der Kultur* Simmel once alleged that “was er webt, das weiß kein Weber” (“no weaver knows whatever he weaves”: author’s translation) (Simmel, 1996 [1911], p. 407) – essentially referring to the purely contingent and unpredictable nature of human interactions, namely with regard to cultural forms. Even if a cultural or a social product is always autonomous from the producers (and its autonomy generates the “tragedy of culture” because of the impossibility of embracing again that which its subjects generated), the socio-cultural mechanism is basically referred to the subjective sphere (simply because a form is always a “thick meaning” given by and among subjects). Here, it is worth recalling the pages of *Grundfragen der Soziologie* (1917), where Simmel states: “Die Form, die

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immer eine Verbindung ist, nur von einem verbindenden Subjekt hinzugefügt wird" (Simmel, 1999 [1917], p. 66).²

This view is also noteworthy in terms of Simmel's sociological concern of emotions. Forms of emotions cannot renounce a subjective *Sinngebung* that characterizes a balanced involvement of emotive and intellectual spheres with the actors involved. This is, for instance, at work with Simmel's idea of modern love: the immanent context of modernity also requires reciprocity with regard to affects and feelings. The monetarization (intellectualization) of love is at work: no love or suffering is admitted if there is no reciprocity. This refers to the ever more abstract nature of love (Simmel, 1984, p. 178-ff.). *Individual* love, as a typical sign of modern lives, neutralizes the transcendent character of love (as value), paradoxically transforming it into *something indifferent*. Even if generated by transactive feelings and elevated from individuals, modern love becomes "indifferent" (like money), so that we can encounter innumerable "loves" (that is, replaceable persons with the same worth and who are "equally" *subjects* of love).

Sociology of emotions in Simmel's work could be regarded as a "geometry of passions" that is consistent with his idea of sociology as the "science of (social) forms". Unlike Spinoza, with his philosophical architecture in the 17th century, basically "destroying passions with reason" (Marshall, 2012), Simmel would rather demonstrate how emotive and intellectual sides are combined in a relational manner. Emotive and intellectual sides work reciprocally: the increasing intellectual nature of life in modernity requires emotions to become "formal": that is, subjected to the principle of exchangeability. This idea was the key concept of *Der Begriff und die Tragödie der Kultur*, when Simmel advocated for the "paradoxical" aspects of modernity and modern culture: the "subjective side" of human mind (*die subjective Seele*) has an ever more dependent engagement with the "objective product" of culture (*das objektiv geistige Erzeugnis*) (Simmel, 1996 [1911], p. 389). The products of culture become autonomous, and humans view them as functional and essential elements for self-recognition and identification, so we encounter these external products as the most intimate "subject" to grasp our individuality. This mechanism also works for the relationship between individuals' emotive and rational lives. The *money* paradigm, which Simmel viewed from the very beginning of his intellectual production, has an impact on individuals' lives.

As Illouz has recently argued, capitalism as the *Zeitgeist* of modernity must be concerned with a pervasive rationality tendency, driving any individual and social behaviour. It is far from a loss of emotionality; the capitalist frame has captured and colonized emotional life, particularly through the world of commodities. Commodities, in fact, became products to facilitate and enhance emotions, and conversely, emotions have been transformed into commodities (Illouz, 2018). This could be a typical Simmelian scheme, particularly looking at the second part of *Philosophy of Money* (1900), where Simmel offers many interesting hints on the "monetarization of existence" and modern "style of life". In *The End of Love*, Illouz indeed remarks that:

"In that sense, casual sex has an abstract form, much like money for Karl Marx and Georg Simmel. Money is abstract because it

makes commodities interchangeable in subsuming them under their exchange (monetary) value. In casual sex, people, like commodities, become equivalent and subsumed under orgasmic pleasure as a currency. In other words, casual sex subsumes people under their orgasmic value and makes them interchangeable and, therefore, abstract as mere pleasure functions" (Illouz, 2019, p. 160).

Gratitude could be regarded as a key concept in a socio-cultural and political sense as a counterintuitive feature with regard to the analysis so far. If we assume gratitude in its unconditioned nature (and in its intrinsic non-rational root), we find that it could be considered "semanticizable" or "formalizable", exactly like pure "sociability" (*Geselligkeit*) in that Simmel escapes any possibility of being understood as a mere calculation. Sociability (as gratitude) is pure play; it is total loss or total profit (depending on points of view). In any case animals, commodities, and AI are incapable of being grateful: they cannot understand incommensurability.

Conclusions

We have explored Simmel's extensive sociological and cultural-philosophical work with respect to the category of relation. His contribution to the history of sociology not only consists of claiming a specific space for sociology as an autonomous science (among humanities), but also for providing essential hints towards a relational aspect of sociology. Social relations are the "stuff" (*der Stoff*) of society: this implies that sociologists must investigate social events and forms assuming relations as ontological and epistemological. The interactive character of the social realm (*Wechselwirkung*) shapes particular kinds of "associated" (*Vergesellschaftung*) ways of life into forms. Simmel remarked upon how this aspect is increased in modernity: the more differentiated and complex the context of social life, the more individuals must also be willing to embrace "exchangeability". This ontological and epistemological aspect refers to every corner of social life, even the emotive side. Simmel demonstrated how the emotive-sensitive nature of individuals is strictly bound to the intensification of *intellectual* activity: within modernity, the need for a "formal" (rationalistic) modelling of social life is accentuated. The fragmentation of modern life is the pendant for the increasing and progressive nature of the intersection of social and cultural circles: as Simmel rightly stated, modern social and cultural worlds have their interactive "raison d'être" due to their being subject to exchangeability. The transcendent aspect of forms in the pure flux of (socio-cultural) life reflects their intimate immanence: the double (and paradoxical) image of modern life is both "more-life" and "more-than-life", as Simmel said in his late work on *Lebensphilosophie*. In the context of modernity, any product of human nature, such as cultural or spiritual objects as well as emotions, is destined to be experienced in its ambivalent nature: to be recognizable, a spiritual product should be increasingly "monetarized" – in other

2. As we find in Simmel's *Soziologie der Geselligkeit* (1910): "The man, as a social creature, is also a unique structure, occurring in no other connection. On the one hand, he has removed all the objective qualities of the personality and entered into the structure of sociability with nothing but the capacities, attractions, and interests of his pure humanity. On the other hand, this structure stops short of the purely subjective and inward parts of his personality" (Simmel 2015, p. 162).

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words, "intellectualized", formalized, generalized. All that is individual must become universal.

Nevertheless, within the wide range of human feelings and emotions, gratitude could represent an important exception: because of its capacity to generate an "absolute" tie or relation between the social actor who donates and the one who receives (and so becomes "grateful"), gratitude lights the path to a different kind of "being-together". It enables us not to conceive of social relations by virtue of the instrumental or rational use of others. Gratitude should also represent a good feature of human cohabiting in the world by virtue of gratuitousness and pure interdependence, which can be the ontological difference between human and non-human actors.

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