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Fostering the dialogue between sociology and critical theory: some remarks on the normative character of social relations from Georg Simmel's sociological theory

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Abstract: This paper aims at reconstructing some aspects of Georg Simmel's relational sociology in order to highlight the possible convergence between (relational) sociology and Critical Theory. Georg Simmel focuses on the idea that society consists of the interactions (*Wechselwirkung*) among individuals, and these interactions generate forms of socialization (*Formen der Vergesellschaftung*) which are investigated by the sociologist. In this regard, the very subject of the social ontology is the social relation. Within the frame of this interaction, individual conducts are expected to be managed under an ethical and intrinsic vocation: each individual plays the social role and society is the moral arena in which any individual feel the constraining forces as ethical claims (as also Durkheim sustained). Good and evil in society govern individual conducts, as well as Critical Theory points out the possible "social pathologies" and "social disfunctions" given by new and old forms of domination and control (or simply unauthentic paths of individual life). Through a reconstruction of the main topics in relational sociological literature, Simmel's texts and the recent debate within Critical Theory, this paper wants to put accent on the inner normative character of social relations, arising from interaction, giving by forms of social life, and carrying possible pathologies when they cannot accomplish to its purposes which is guaranteeing a "good life" for individuals involved.

1. Georg Simmel: a Relational sociologist

Georg Simmel is probably the first and the most meaningful sociologist to contribute to the foundation of sociology as an independent

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science among humanities, namely addressing it as a science of “interaction”, “relation” or “reciprocal action” [*Wechselwirkung*]. Olli Pyyhtinen has recently highlighted how Simmel’s theory could be considered as a “science of relations”²: Simmel surely uses relation (*Beziehung*) and interactive determinations as a heuristic category in order to explain the social order and the social processes, and then he assumes reciprocity in order to tackle epistemological, ontological, and cultural questions. *Wechselwirkung* became formerly a very “metaphysical” principle, as he explicitly affirmed in his *Anfang einer unvollendeten Selbstdarstellung* (1898): an exhaustive and wide meaning useful to engage new forms of sociality and cultural subjects into modernity, but also the key-concept into epistemology, historical, socio-psychological, and moral sciences³.

In this worthy document, Simmel presented himself as a scholar who gained scientific results engaging the concept of “reciprocal action” (*Wechselwirkung*) and testing its validity into the field of epistemology, philosophy of culture, and sociology. Particularly in his sociological studies, he maintained that the separation between forms and contents into “reciprocal actions” allowed him to build sociology as an autonomous science among humanities. Due to this clarifying premise, he thus conceived sociology as the science of the “forms of association” (*Formen der Vergesellschaftung*), which represent the stratification and sedimentation of the formerly explained principle of *Wechselwirkung*.

In his masterpiece *Soziologie* (1908) Georg Simmel did not only put (and erect) sociology as autonomous science among humanities, but he primarily recognized that the social as such consists of relations and interactions, namely – guided by a common Neokantian scheme – he viewed that it could be concerned under an epistemological perspective as a subject divided into a *form* and a *content*. As he states in the first chapter of *Soziologie*:

2 See Olli Pyyhtinen, *The Simmelian Legacy. A Science of Relations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).

3 Georg Simmel, *Buch des Dankes an Georg Simmel. Briefe, Erinnerungen, Bibliographie. Zu Seinem 1. Geburtstag Am 1. März 1958* (Berlin: Duncker&Humblot, 1958), 9.

That is, a society exists where several individuals enter into interaction [*Wechselwirkung*]. This interaction always originates from specific impulses within or for the sake of specific purposes. Erotic, religious, or purely social impulses, purposes of defense from attack, the play of commerce, the need for assistance from instruction, and countless other purposes bring it about that human beings enter into fellowship - correlating their affairs with one another in activity for one another, with one another, against one another, activity that both affects them and feels the effects of them. These interactions indicate precisely that the individuals bearing these motivating drives and

In the seventh chapter on *The Poor Person*, Simmel thus clarifies what reciprocity means within the frame of his sociological theory:

One can look at society in general as a reciprocity of moral, legal, and conventional relationships, and as a reality justified under many other categories; that this implies a duty for others is only, so to speak, a logical or technical consequence, and if the unthinkable were to happen, that satisfying every claim in a way other than in the form of fulfilling the obligation were to be sufficient, society would not require the category of duty⁴.

In this regard, there could be a conceptual wreck reading some Simmel's writings, namely the philosophical ones: I particularly refer to *Philosophy of Money* (1900) in which Simmel seems to regard relation as pure "exchange" function, in order to explain modern social and cultural practices. "Exchange" may have indeed a normative effect on social actors, even if considered under a "financial" manner according to original Simmel's foundation of sociology into his masterpiece *Philosophy of Money*⁵.

In the preface of *Philosophy of money* Simmel directly faces Marx, and suggests the attempt to construct "a new storey beneath historical materialism": this is a very interesting hint, also looking to a different kind of reading Simmel's work in regard to Marx and more broadly to Critical

4 Ibid., 409.

5 See Christian Emden, "Die Normativität des Kapitals. Zur politischen Aktualität von Georg Simmels Philosophie des Geldes". *Zeitschrift für Kulturphilosophie*, 9 (2015): 179-206.

Theory⁶. Simmel sustains that the explanatory value of the incorporation of economic life into the causes of intellectual culture is preserved, while these economic forms themselves are recognized as the result of more profound valuations and currents of psychological or even metaphysical preconditions. And hence he states: “For the practice of cognition this must develop in infinite reciprocity”⁷.

2. Normative reciprocity: convergence of Simmel’s ideas and recent Critical Theory debate

It is not trivial to put forward what we must mean with the formula *normative reciprocity*. Within the social sciences, on the one hand, many agree on reciprocity as analytical category (it is largely accepted within relational sociologists); on the other hand, many others dismiss any issue dealing with normative account, simply because they regard it as a non-sociological matter. This divarication clearly emerges from the pages of Stephen Turner’s book *Explaining the normative* (2010). According to Turner, “normativists” are those who claim that social is basically reduced to “normative facts” which are considered the basic analytical stage. They involve such concepts as “transcendence”, “correctness” or “validity”, which are *conditions of possibility* of social life: normativists tackle thus social facts, assuming (or postulating) special transcendental qualities or ‘validity’ within social interactions. Turner denies the possibility to consider normativist theories as causal explanation to describe social facts. Normative basically has to do with something *should be*, in spite of what any empirical and descriptive science must do, that is telling and reporting *what the realm is*.

We commonly divide scientists under two main categories, as Abbott suggests to explain social order maintaining the centrality of “transition”

6 See Davide Ruggieri, “«Constructing a New Storey Beneath Historical Materialism»: Georg Simmel and the Foundations of a «Relational» Critical Theory”. *Berlin Journal of Critical Theory*, 3(2) (2019): 61-90.

7 Georg Simmel, *Philosophy of money* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004): 54.

and “contingency” concepts⁸: we have ‘normativists’, on the one side, and ‘empiricists’, on the other side. Social sciences must look indeed at both of these two levels of social facts (normative and empirical). We experience nowadays social sciences beyond Max Weber’s warning on the “objectivity” and “neutrality” of the historical-social sciences which does not only concern the possibility or not of expressing value-judgments, but it is based on the fundamental idea that it can never be the task of an empirical science (such as sociology and any social science) “[...] to provide binding norms and ideals from which directives for immediate practical activity can be derived”⁹. Distinguishing between *empirical statements* of facts or *value-judgments* it is the objective criterion for social science¹⁰.

In other words, an empirical science cannot prescribe anything to individuals, it does not exert any power in saying whatever he *should* do, but it aims at understanding the ways in which individuals *can* and *wish* in certain circumstances. This appeal to not concern social sciences as value-judgement free has to be read beside some peculiar hints given by Weber in *Wissenschaft als Beruf* (1917), where he conceived as the first goal of social sciences to enlighten individual actions, that is to make aware them of the tight relationship between means and goals – means required for the attainment of some goals – as well as clarify the connection between the attainment of those goals and its (expected or unexpected) consequences¹¹.

8 Andrew Abbott, “The Future of the Social Sciences: Between Empiricism and Normativity”. *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 71 (3) (2006):202.

9 Max Weber, *The Methodology of social sciences* (New York: Routledge, 2017): 52.

10 The question finds in the recent debate further development: sociology is required to be not only a science in regard with its *descriptive* aim, but nowadays (by virtue of the more and more use of algorithmic or big data analysis) also in regard with its *predictive* character. Maccarini has recently highlighted this issue, trying to disentangle the knots on the concern of sociology and on its tasks (Maccarini 2023).

11 Max Weber, *The vocation lectures: Science as a vocation. Politics as a vocation* (Indianapolis-Cambridge: The Hackett publishing company, 2004): 11.

A rigorous assessment on what reciprocity might represent under a sociological meaning is surely furnished by relational sociology (or it should be better to talk on *relational sociologies*). Among the several perspectives on this issue, Pierpaolo Donati alleges that “[...] society does not host relations, it is not a space-time where relations happen, *it is relations*”¹². This relational-emergentist theory is coherent to the morphogenetic approach, namely Margarete Archer’s. Both these authors claim in *The Relational Subject* (2015) book that reciprocity “[...] creates (activates and reactivates, generates and regenerates) a social relationship as such, for the super-functional value that it has”¹³ and moreover: “Reciprocity and free giving are two ways of acting united by the fact that they share a certain anti-individualism, a certain anti-utilitarianism, and a certain orientation to horizontality (that is, to a non-hierarchical reticular action)”¹⁴. This perspective was recently criticized by Christian Papilloud in his volume *Sociology through Relations* (2018), because he sees some contradictory propositions in regard to Donati’s foundational claim (from an epistemological and ontological view) that “society consists of relations”: maybe it is the case to deepen this issue. To say that relation is the first subject of sociology doesn’t necessarily disregard reciprocity if we maintain that encountering others and triggering interactions is the first cry of any social issue. Reciprocity means that (social) actors reply to interactive processes in adequate manner in regard to what is expected from others: reciprocity does not mean symmetry. I suggest to interpret this issue under the meaning given in Saint Augustine’s talks on equality between man and God. *Non ad aequalitatem, sed pro modo nostro* (Discourses IX,3): not the abstract principle of a horizontal equality, but a similitude principle regulates social transaction in order to achieve reciprocity. Individuals or social actors are not the same, in the meaning of a “reflec-

12 Pierpaolo Donati, *Relational Sociology. A New Paradigm for the Social Sciences*. (London: Routledge, 2011): XV.

13 Pierpaolo Donati and Margaret Archer, *The Relational Subject*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 249.

14 *Ibid.*, 250.

tion" (A=B in regard to an abstract equality principle) [*ad aequalitatem*]; rather individuals are similar and they must interact in respect to their own differences and a similarity principle [*ad similitudinem*]¹⁵.

Reciprocity is the *form* of social relation: in other words, without reciprocity there could only be individual conducts, or at least social actions, but not certainly relations. In *Rembrandtstudie* (1914) Simmel alleged that "[...] the form is timeless because it consists only in the movement and relation of the view contents; and it has no strength, because it cannot exert any effect inasmuch form; only within life, keeping on flowing underground, and its causal process, also this stage is prolonged in further effects"¹⁶.

The social ontology of reciprocity should maintain that the very subject into sociological inquiries is the relation as an emergent effect of interaction among individuals¹⁷. Interaction is the dynamic side of social life which is to conceive as a flow; it produces thus forms which are the static side of social life and they shape a specific identity. In *Das Problem der Soziologie* (in both of 1894 and 1908 released editions) Simmel gave a name to the interactive/dynamic social mechanism and its crystallization [*Formalisierung*]: respectively *Wechselwirkung* and *Vergesellschaftung*. Max Weber also focused on the *Vergesellschaftung* issue distinguishing it from *Vergemeinschaftung* principle¹⁸: Weber alleged in the pages of *Econ-*

15 Fukuyama has taken into account the reciprocity issue under a norm-oriented approach, and it represents a basic element mainly in regard with the social capital concept. He put in fact that "social capital is an instantiated informal norm that promotes cooperation between two or more individuals. The norms that constitutes social capital can range from a norm of reciprocity between friends, all the way to complex and elaborately articulated doctrines like Christianity or Confucianism" (Francis Fukuyama, 2000. *Social Capital and Civil Society* (April 2000). IMF Working Paper No. 00/74: 3).

16 Georg Simmel, *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1909–1918*, Band II, GSG 13 (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main, 2000): 39.

17 See Davide Ruggieri, "Emergenza, riduzione, relazione: il paradigma della sociologia relazionale e il dualismo tra struttura e cultura". *Studi di sociologia*, 54(3) (2016): 279-293.

18 See Klaus Lichtblau, *Das »Pathos der Distanz«*. Präliminarien zur Nietzsche-Rezeption bei Georg Simmel, in Heinz-Jürgen Dahme, Otthein Rammstedt (eds.),

omy and society that the rational organization of modern social life is to be conceived as *Vergesellschaftung*, that is the typical mode under a *Zweckbeziehung* or *Wertbeziehung*.

Georg Simmel played a decisive role among the theorists of the first generation in the Frankfurt School: Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer (who was the *spiritus rector* of the studies and researches in Critical Theory as well as the founder of the Frankfurt School) were in debt with Simmel's ideas and style. His disruptive and unsystematic thought was very impressive and we could surely find (overtly or not) trace of his ideas in such authors. As once Alfred Schmidt noted, the "art of micrological observation" in Simmel and the "materialistic" analysis of everyday life¹⁹ were surely decisive in Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin, Kracauer and more generally in such authors who shared at time these suggestions given by the analysis of the "mental life" in the modern metropolis: Simmel's *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben* (1903) is emblematic and it represents a socio-philosophical attempt to understand the modern issues of individuals within the complex life of metropolitan spaces and times²⁰. There are biographical evidences emerging from the correspondence between Max Horkheimer and Hans Simmel, which testifies the great intellectual debt of Horkheimer toward the sociological and philosophical thought of Georg Simmel²¹.

Georg Simmel und die Moderne (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000)

- 19 See Alfred Schmidt, "Die geistige Physiognomie Max Horkheimers". In M.Horkheimer, *Notizen 1950 bis 1969 und Dämmerung: Notizen in Deutschland* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1974).
- 20 In this regard Simmel is also decisive for the understanding of the acceleration (and "accelerated social lives") of contemporary society according to Hartmut Rosa and his "resonance" paradigm (Rosa 2019): Rosa explicitly refers to Simmel in his work *The Uncontrollability of the World* (Hartmut Rosa, *The uncontrollability of the world*. Wiley: New York Rosa, 2020: 24 and ff.), particularly looking at the interactional feature of our modern (social) lives, given by our more and more "exchangeable" social nature in metropolitan life.
- 21 See Davide Ruggieri, "The Unpublished Correspondence between Hans Simmel and Max Horkheimer (1936–1943). Some Remarks on Critical Theory, Georg Simmel's Sociology, and the Tasks of the Institute for Social Research". *Simmel Studies*, 24(1) (2020): 127-158.

3. Normative reciprocity and the critique of forms of social life

In *Philosophy of Money* Simmel concerns exchange as a very form of (social) life. He states: “It should be recognized that most relationships between people can be interpreted as forms of exchange. Exchange is the purest and most developed kind of interaction, which shapes human life when it seeks to acquire substance and content”²². Simmel efforts a theory of exchange within the frame of an *economization* of social and cultural life: he contributes to the Neokantian debate of the late XIX century, advancing a theory of cultural and social exchange; the more differentiated and complex modern society gets, the more it requires individuals to “monetize” their existence. It means that the increasing intertwined and differentiated character of modern society, that is the intersection of more and more social circles, testifies the necessity to get exchangeable (at the highest level) social and cultural identities. More precisely Simmel states that exchange is an emergent phenomenon producing effects on engaged members or entities: “Economic values are produced by the same reciprocity and relativity that determine the economic character of values. Exchange is not the mere addition of two processes of giving and receiving, but a new third phenomenon, in which each of the two processes is simultaneously cause and effect”²³. This conviction allows him also a relativistic solution of the metaphysical question on truth – a cultural-philosophical solution²⁴: it is the effect of a reciprocal interaction of different perspectives or imagines of the world.

This reciprocity, in which the inner elements of cognition authenticate the meaning of truth for each other, appears to be upheld by another form of relativity, that between the theoretical and the practical interests of our life. We are convinced that all representations of what exists are functions of a specif-

22 Georg Simmel, *Philosophy of money*, 79.

23 Ibid., 88.

24 See Matthieu Amat, *Le relationnisme philosophique de Georg Simmel. Une idée de la culture* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2018).

ic physical and psychological organization which do not mirror the outside world in any mechanical way²⁵.

Simmel was persuaded that such central concepts as “truth”, “values”, and “objectivity” in his philosophy (and sociology) of culture had to be interpreted within the frame of a “relativistic” (and heuristic) view²⁶:

Truth means the relationship between representations, which may be realized as an infinite construction, since, even if our knowledge is based upon truths that are no longer relative, we can never know whether we have reached the really final stage, or whether we are again on the road to a more general and profound conception; or it may consist in a reciprocal relation within these systems of representations and its demonstration is also reciprocal²⁷.

What is at stake in Simmel’s work is the idea of the legitimation of a necessary practice due to the augmented differentiation of modern society, which requires individuals to get their identities *subject of exchange processes*. According to Fitzi and Thouard’s interpretation of Simmel’s category of reciprocity, legitimation aspect and normative reasons are involved into typical mechanisms of modernity, and Simmel’s solution gets towards “the law of individual” insight: “Tous les aspects normatifs de la problématique moderne y sont en effet consignés à la sphère pratique. En la matière, l’option de Simmel est l’éthique individuelle”²⁸.

Exchange represents the first subject (also in logic-temporal terms) for the relational scheme given by Marcel Mauss. As Papilloud affirms: “Mauss insists on the sense of obligation between the actors of the gift,

25 Georg Simmel, *Philosophy of money*, 14.

26 Simmel’s view is relational in the sense that he conceives relation (*Wechselwirkung*) as a very broad category (metaphysical, sociological, ethical...) to understand and to explain the world. He was accused of being “relativist” from many scholars and colleagues, and actually his position stands undecidable (see Davide Ruggieri, “Georg Simmel and the “relational Turn”. Contributions to the foundation of the Lebenssoziologie since Simmel”. *Simmel Studies*, 21(1) (2017): 43-71).

27 Georg Simmel, *Philosophy of money*, 113.

28 Gregor Fitzi and Denis Thouard. “Réciprocités sociales. Lectures de Simmel”. *Sociologie et sociétés*, 44 (2) (2012): 7.

which exists primarily because of their exchanges. Once taken up in the circulation of gifts, the actors have practical obligations to fulfil, of which they cannot be discharged - at least not without exposing themselves to strong social sanctions"²⁹. Reciprocity represents the very "stuff" of society: it has a very ancestral and anthropological meaning, according to the deep insight given by Mauss in his studies on gift. It neither deals with individuals, nor with institutions: it represents the interstitial *niveau* among individuals, among social processes. It builds social from inside: it arises, it sediments, it thus objectifies the necessary human exchange and the need to recognize and being recognized as subjects into an interactional frame. Mead, Schutz, and many others have been tackling this issue, exploring the manifold aspects of human being-in-relation. Social sciences have definitively recognized the role of relation as the very issue of sociological investigations and inquires³⁰. This would only confirm that maybe sociology and social sciences have a natural affinity with what has to do with "social life" as a relational issue³¹. In this regard, Michel Freitag offers stimulating theoretical hints, affirming that a relational concern of sociology conceives society as an ontological entity, which will be immanently reproduced by social relations and social practices³². But society is not only an ontological entity, it is also a normative one³³, because any of

29 Christian Papilloud. *Sociology through Relation: Theoretical Assessments from the French Tradition* (New York: Palgrave, 2018):66.

30 In this regard see Christian Powell and François Dépelteau, (eds.). *Conceptualizing Relational Sociology. Ontological and Theoretical Issues* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Christian Powell and François Dépelteau (eds.) *Applying Relational Sociology. Relations, Networks, and Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Jan Fuhse and Sophie Mützel (eds.), *Relationale Soziologie : zur kulturellen Wende der Netzwerkforschung* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2010); Robert Seyfert, *Beziehungsweisen. Elemente einer relationalen Soziologie*. (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2019).

31 See Judith Butler. "Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?: Adorno Prize Lecture". *Radical Philosophy*, 176 (2012): 9-18.

32 Michel Freitag, *Dialectique et société*. (Vol. 2. Montréal: Editions Saint-Martin, 1986: 14).

33 Hałas has recently put accent on the crossing aspects of ethical and social features of social relation (see Elzbieta Hałas. "Discovering the Relational

its expressions in relations and practices are non-neutral ones, and, this aspect is very peculiar in Mauss' theory³⁴. Society is thus the "symbolic mediation" in social life³⁵, coherently to the Durkheimian tradition.

Relations could be meant under different perspectives and theoretical positions: they could stay for processes, structures, networks, fields, and they could involve human as well as not-human beings³⁶. Latour sustains that social must be considered as "[...] the name of a movement, a displacement, a transformation, a translation, an enrollment. It is an association between *entities* which are in no way recognizable as being social in the ordinary manner, except during the brief moment when they are reshuffled together"³⁷. Latour's perspective is also stressed by Scott Lash towards a *Lebenssoziologie*, which represents a "great theory" on social as vital processes³⁸. Social life is a sure topical interest into our discourse on normative reciprocity, but it is uneasy to enlarge and extend the effects (and the causal power) of reciprocity also on non-human being³⁹, but the

Relevance of Reciprocity". In *The Relational Gaze on a Changing Society*, ed. Elisabetta Carrà and Paolo Terenzi. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2019: 89–105; Elżbieta Hałas. "Relational Care: Rethinking Altruism". In *Relational Reason, Morals and Sociality*, ed. Elżbieta Hałas and Aleksander Manterys. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021: 69–93).

34 Michel Freitag, *Dialectique et société*, 177.

35 Michel Freitag, *Dialectique et société*. Vol. 1. Montréal: Editions Saint-Martin, 1986: 11 and ff.

36 On this topics see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to the Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Jane Bennet, *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things* (Durham-London: Duke. University Press, 2010); Ismael Al Amoudi and Jamie Morgan (eds.), *Realist Responses to Post-Human Society: Ex Machina* (London: Routledge, 2018); Robert Seyfert, *Beziehungsweisen. Elemente einer relationalen Soziologie*.

37 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to the Actor-Network Theory*, 64-65.

38 See Scott Lash "Lebenssoziologie: Georg Simmel in the Information Age". *Theory, Culture & Society*, 22(3) (2005): 1-23; Heike Delitz, Firthjof Nungesser, and Robert Seyfert, *Soziologien des Lebens. Überschreitung – Differenzierung – Kritik* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2018).

39 A crucial distinction between humans and non-humans still remains on the reflexive coefficient, that is the idea that non-humans basically do not understand what they act, elaborate, compute and so on. As recently Faggin al-

challenge of social sciences exactly deals with this new scenario in which objects, computing machines, “moral machines”, and all digital technologies are getting deeper and deeper part of the social realm.

Reciprocity stands for the ontological sphere of any social realm. Simmel synthesized this issue giving a metaphorical account of the interactive processes which make the social: in his masterpiece *Soziologie* he asks “how is society possible?”, that is how society and societal forms arise and have proper consistency beyond individual existences. The making of society is given through three main conditions, which Simmel literally calls *a priori* (getting inspired by the Kantian theoretical ones). As Thomas Kemple highlights: “these apriorities suggest thresholds of reciprocal interaction through which the elements of life as a whole are connected to or separated from one another, embracing both natural objects and human subjects”⁴⁰.

Simmel maintains that the first social apriori is “the image of the other”; it is the very naïve social position of each individual in a social interaction (reciprocal) assigning to each one a specific “image”:

We are all fragments, not only of humanity in general but also of ourselves. We are amalgamations not only of the human type in general, not only of types of good and evil and the like, but we are also amalgamations of our own individuality and uniqueness – no longer distinguishable in principle – which envelops our visible reality as if drawn with ideal lines. However, the view of the other broadens these fragments into what we never actually are purely and wholly⁴¹.

In Simmel individuals remain “subjects” even if they interact with others, and thus getting “objects” of the interactional order. It depends on the second social *a priori*, that is there is something (*Ausserdem*) determin-

leges, machines are able to process a great number of informations and data, but they are basically not *conscious* (or aware) of what they manage: they are symbolic machines, while we (human) are semantic machines: see Federico Faggin, *Irreducible: Consciousness, Life, Computers, and Human Nature* (Essentia books 2024).

40 Thomas Kemple, *Simmel* (New York: Polity Press, 2018).

41 Georg Simmel, *Sociology*, 44

ing social character of individuals, which cannot be indeed “interacted” into social realm.

Finally, we find the third social *a priori*, that is the *Beruf* (profession/vocation) category: according to Simmel, society is a combination of dissimilar elements, for even where democratic or socialist forces plan or partially realize an “equality”, it can only be equality in the sense of being equal in value; there can be no question of homogeneity. The *a priori* principles in Simmel’s first chapter of *Soziologie* (1908) stand on the assumption that each individual can find its own place in society: these two dimensions of ideal and real position collide in an appropriate position for the individual in society. Horst Helle affirms, particularly on the third social *a priori* (*Beruf*) that “this is the condition upon which the social life of the individual is based, and which one might term the universality of individuality”⁴².

Pluralism is the key (and the premise) of the functional interaction among social subjects: this don’t necessarily mean that “relationism” must be seen as synonym of relativism, as many relational sociologists allege (from the Bourdeausian ones to the Neo-pragmatists and Transactionalists). It is the case to appeal to Weber’s formula “polytheism of values”, to state that pluralism in modernity is a fate, but it doesn’t necessarily mean relativism⁴³. “Demons” and “gods” still are fighting dressing new aspects: in this regard, some recent trends in sociological theories (I particularly look at Latour’s ANT and the manifold effects on several disciplines among social sciences) legitimizes a new kind of Manichaeism, in which differences becomes more and more vanished. Human and non-human, subject and quasi-objects, individuals and collective identities, any opposition is going to fall down by virtue of a kind of (in)difference principle: the more you claim for erasing any “ontological difference” (to use Heidegger’s well-known motto) in order to legitimate universal rights (stressing an uncontrolled and symmetrical allocation of right subjects), the more you have a relativistic account of what could be considered a subject.

42 Horst Helle, Introduction to the Translation of G.Simmel, *Sociology*, 7.

43 Max Weber, *The Methodology of social sciences*,17.

Pluralism means that there are several different subjects interacting and creating social space: reciprocity doesn't stand for symmetry, since there are different positions within social space (also according to what Bourdieu sustains about "fields" and social space) due to different characteristics of individualities and social actors. Different allocations of identity don't mean inequality *only if* reciprocity works as a normative principle, that is recognizing otherness in force of its constitutive differences. In this regard Bruno Latour – who is regarded as a relational inspiration for some sociologists – offers good insights in his *We have never been modern* (1993) where he sustains that "[...] the principle of symmetry aims not only at establishing equality – which is only the way to set the scale at zero – but at registering differences – that is, in the final analysis, asymmetries – and at understanding the practical means that allow some collectives to dominate others"⁴⁴.

In 1992 *The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of its Voices* essay Habermas already stressed the idea of inter-subjectivity as a "glimmer of symmetrical relations marked by free, reciprocal recognition. [...] Connected with this is the modern meaning of humanism, long expressed in the idea of a self-conscious life, of authentic self-realization, and of autonomy – a humanism that is not bent on self-assertion"⁴⁵. In *The Inclusion of the Other* (1998) Habermas hence focused on this idea, alleging: "This moral community constitutes itself solely by way of the negative idea of abolishing discrimination and harm and of extending relations of mutual recognition of mutual recognition to include marginalized men and women"⁴⁶. His formula of "a universalism that is highly sensitive to differences" became paradigmatic. Christian Papilloud recently relaunched the challenge given by Habermas' words, and he puts together reciprocity issue with the question on the relational sociology: he namely considers rec-

44 Bruno Latour, *We have never been modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 107-108.

45 Jürgen Habermas, *Post-metaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 145.

46 Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), XXVI.

iprocity “[...] as a special relationship that legitimates institutions and personal actors, and whose concrete manifestation is strongly conditioned by the expansion strategies of institutions on the one hand, and to a lesser degree by the personal actors on the other”⁴⁷.

Very close to the analytical and theoretical frame of Papilloud studies, this paper argues for a deep investigation on what reciprocity may still express for social sciences, and what it may represent within the debate on multiculturalism. Since the dialogue among different cultures seems to sail in critical conditions: the failure of globalization in political and cultural term risks very strongly to bring us back to a nationalize our identities, as recently Crouch highlighted⁴⁸: he stresses the idea that globalization produced negative effects on the political and cultural stage, with the emergence of new inequalities and forms of nostalgic regressions, instead of representing increasing international cooperation and increasing interdependence.

Many years before, Erving Goffman investigated on the interactive social order, giving accent on the normative functions within social *situations*. In his masterpiece *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) he viewed that interactions among individuals are mediated by role and identifying features which deal with both moral expectations and social duties. He literally alleges:

Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in a correspondingly appropriate way. Connected with this principle is a second, namely that an individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought to have this claim honoured by others and ought in fact to be what he claims he is. In consequence, when an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them

47 Christian Papilloud, *Sociology through Relation: Theoretical Assessments from the French Tradition*, 2.

48 Colin Crouch, *The Globalization Backlash* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect⁴⁹.

In *The Interaction Order* Goffman clarifies that “orderly interaction” has to be viewed neither as a social contract, nor as a social consensus⁵⁰, also because for the term “order” he means “a domain of activity”. He prefers to regard order as a “interactional zoo” (or garden) where you can list - for sociological interests and purposes - (1) *persons/ambulatory units* (“as vehicular entities, that is, with human ambulatory”), (2) *contacts* (“any occasion when an individual comes into an other’s response presence, whether through physical copresence, telephonic connection or letter exchange”); (3) *conversational encounters* (“[...] in which persons come together into a small physical circle as ratified participants in a consciously shared, clearly interdependent undertaking, the period of participation itself bracketed with rituals of some kind, or easily susceptible to their invocation”); (4) *the platform performances* (“a talk, a contest, a formal meeting, a play, a movie, a musical offering, a display of dexterity or trickery, a round of oratory, a ceremony, a combination thereof”); (5) the *celebrative social occasions* (“the foregathering of individuals admitted on a controlled basis, the whole occurring under the auspices of, and in honor of, some jointly appreciated circumstance” (Goffman, 1983: 6-7). Goffman founds a “normative reciprocity” assessment on the interaction order when he finally alleges that:

[...] the social relationship we call “mere acquaintanceship” incorporates knowership and little else, constituting thereby a limiting case – a social relationship whose consequences are restricted to social situations – or here the obligation to provide evidence of this relationship *is* the relationship. And this evidence is the stuff of interaction” (Goffman 1983, p. 13).

In other words, he viewed that the fact of being involved in social interactions puts simply actors in an obligation scheme which is not derived from a moral order; it exactly regards a sociological *niveau*.

49 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in everyday Life* (New York: Anchor books, 1959), 13.

50 Erving Goffman, “The Interaction Order: American Sociological Association, 1982 Presidential Address”. *American Sociological Review*, 48(1) (1998): 5.

In the same years, the category of reciprocity was efficaciously argued by Alvin Gouldner in his well-known article on *The Norm of reciprocity* (1960). Beyond explicitly referring to (and inspiring by) Howard Becker with his book *Man in Reciprocity* and the formula of *Homo reciprocus*, Gouldner also mentioned L.T.Hobhouse who once held that “reciprocity is the vital principle of society”. In regard to complementarity which “[...] connotes that one’s rights are another’s obligations, and viceversa, Gouldner alleges that reciprocity “[...] connotes that each party has rights and duties [...]”. And moreover (and more significantly), reciprocity has its significance for role systems in that it tends to structure each role so as to include both rights and duties⁵¹. Within the frame of Ego-Alter interaction, Alter may reciprocate ego’s action to a greater or lesser degree. These are two features of “reciprocity as a pattern of mutually contingent exchange⁵². Besides the pattern of exchange, there is a norm of reciprocity that “evokes obligations toward others on the basis of their past behavior⁵³. Gouldner distinguishes moreover also between egoistic or altruistic ways to act under a reciprocal action. Finally, reciprocity may be positive or negative⁵⁴. In recent years Robert Putnam challenged Gouldner’s topic towards a theory of “social capital” and he defines the concept as follows: “social capital— that is, social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity⁵⁵.

Peter Blau released *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (1964), putting accent of exchange mechanisms within the frame of the social processes. According to Blau, social exchange basically differs from economic exchange for three important reasons. First, the items of exchange are not commodities, but gifts. No money is involved, nor credit, nor contract.

51 Alvin Gouldner, “The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement”. *American Sociological Review*, 25 (2) (1960):169.

52 Ibid., 161.

53 Ibid., 170.

54 Alvin Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (New York: Basics books, 1970), 172.

55 Robert Putnam, “Social capital: Measurement and consequences”. *Canadian Journal of Policy Research*, 2 (2001): 41.

Giving a gift is a “selfish act of generosity” in that it creates in the recipient the need to reciprocate with something that is desired by the giver. Blau alleges that (at least) both parties to the exchange “[...] are prone to supply more of their own services to provide incentives for the other to increase his supply” (Blau 1964, p. 89). Gift does not necessarily represent an expression of altruism; rather, in most cases it is a way to exercise power over another. Second, the terms of exchange are unspecified (Blau 1964, p. 91). One side offers something the other values, without knowing how or when the partner will return the favor. Third, the exchange is not instrumentally calculated. Without a quid pro quo and in the absence of explicit bargaining, one cannot know if the gift is optimal in a given transaction.

In *Social Systems* (1984) Niklas Luhmann delegitimized the function of reciprocity within the argument of *double contingency* mechanism: in this regard, he states that any form of symmetrical assessment in a systemic theory is destined to fail. Any symmetric model crashes facing the question of complexity and the necessarily selective reduction of complexity that is steered self-referentially within the system:

Above all, we must detach ourselves from the traditional manner of treatment that tried to solve the problem of double contingency (even when it did not call it that) with concepts like “reciprocity,” “reflection,” “reciprocity of perspectives,” or even reciprocity of performances. The unity being sought was seen as a kind of “stapling together” what was different. Similarly, sociality was conceived as relationships between individuals, and one was led to believe that individuals could not drop out of the picture without relationships also disappearing⁵⁶.

Nevertheless, Luhmann rehabilitates reciprocity moreover when he advocates that *interpenetration* is the key mechanism within systemic frames. Due to the increasing differentiation and internal evolution of systems (that is hierarchy principle and claiming identity through dif-

56 Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems* (Redwood city: Stanford University Press 1996), 107

ferences), evolution itself can take place thanks to *interpenetration*, and more precisely Luhmann alleges:

[...] only with the evolution of higher forms of system formation are that evolution's presuppositions brought into the form that is then appropriate. They come about only by use. Therefore, evolution is possible only by *interpenetration*, that is, only by *reciprocity*. From the systems-theoretical viewpoint, evolution is a circular process that constitutes itself in reality (and not in nothingness!)⁵⁷.

Conclusions

Under a methodological aspect, we can advance a good-life-centered approach nurturing a culturally and ethically sensitive *social relations*. This would mean to cross relational sociology (or relational theory) with some crucial aspects of Critical Theory dealing with the concepts of "good life", "reciprocity", "social justice", "reflexivity". In a nutshell, we put that relational theory and critical theory basically converge on some very core issue in sociological debate. Social theory must inquire on forms of social life which are the relational aspect of "being-in-relations", that is the reciprocal effect of the everyday relational life among individuals, and between individuals and institutions. Social relations could nurture and nourish "social goods" or "social evils": social facts have always a normative content, so that social sphere must always be considered to have an intrinsic ethical issue.

In this regard, Rahel Jaeggi offered interesting hints: in *Kritik der Lebensformen* (2004) she literally admits that "[...] the thesis that forms of life have a normative content seems banal, if not even tautological"⁵⁸, but she means indeed that we should start analyzing the existing individual and collective forms of being-together, up to the individual style of life: consequently, her theory aims at deeply exploring the *normative* characteristics of forms of social life. Jaeggi basically puts that forms in social life are meant under five meanings:

⁵⁷ Ibid., 216.

⁵⁸ Rahel Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life* (New York: Belknap 2018), 122.

- 1) “Norms specify a *standard* that someone or something can meet or fail to meet”; it deals with the style of life (and this idea should conduct us very far, at least at the analytical part of *Philosophie des Geldes* by Simmel, who is unfortunately not mentioned by Jaeggi);
- 2) *normative* is commonly put in opposition with *descriptive* (and this basically deals with an epistemological issue since social sciences must observe a pure descriptive approach);
- 3) “According to a commonplace definition, norm-conforming behavior is rule-guided or *rule-governed* as opposed to merely *regular*”;
- 4) “Norms direct our behavior, and where we comply with them, they require us to do something. It is characteristic of norms in this respect that they are *manmade* formations, hence that they are (in principle) shaped and shapeable”;
- 5) The “space of norms” is thus a “space of reasons” (the question of justification and reasoning why adopting certain conducts).

In the chapter *Forms of life as normative belonging* Jaeggi thus advocates that the forms of life have a normative connotation because they are based on the demand for normative expectations⁵⁹.

Among the other authors of the fourth generation within the Critical Theory, Hartmut Rosa is surely one of the most representative for the purposes of our discourse. He coined the sociological and philosophical category of *Resonance* [*Resonanz*] to address that it is a “good” way of encountering the world, that is, people, things, matter, history, nature and life as such⁶⁰. According to Rosa, the quality of human (social) life cannot be simply measured through algorithmic options or resources, but it would be necessary an investigation on related-to-world conditions [*Weltverhältnisse*] and on the relationships to world [*Weltbeziehungen*]. Good life corresponds to Rosa to good relations, because the question is never a matter of scope or instrumental calculation of goods; namely good relations are “a particular way of relating to the world – to places

59 Ibid., 20.

60 Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance. A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 54.

and people, to ideas and bodies, to time and to nature, to self and others". Resonance is thus for Rosa a way of rehabilitating our social co-existence in order to preserve and to enhance it by four crucial elements: 1. "*Being affected*. Resonating with another person, or even with a landscape, a melody, or an idea, means being «inwardly» reached, touched, or moved by them (**af←fection**); 2. "*Emotive self-efficacy*. At the same time, we can speak of true resonance only when this call is followed by our own active response (**e→motion**); 3. "*Adaptive transformation*. Whenever we resonate with another human being, a book, a song, a landscape, an idea, a piece of wood, we are transformed by the encounter, although of course in very different ways (**transformative quality**); 4. "*Uncontrollability of resonance* [...] which means, first, that there is no method) no seven- or nine-step guide that can guarantee that we will be able to resonate with people or things" (**non-controllability** or **not-availableness** [*Unverfügbarkeit*])⁶¹.

Critical Theory (and namely some aspects investigated by such authors like Jaeggi and Rosa) and relational sociology should regard relations as forms of "normative reciprocity" including the investigation on the social conditions which characterize interactions among individuals who basically conduct their lives aiming at their own "good life", and more precisely a critical investigation (and evaluation) on the conditions impeding and inhibiting to grasp their own "good life". This means that liberty, autonomy, self-realization, happiness as social issues, must be assumed as *relational* issues, in the form of the *normative reciprocity*. Good relations could be regarded as a *black box*: they have a necessary and unpredictable character; they cannot be *a priori* defined, nor described from observers as a mere fixed subject. Sociology should investigate on relations as a primary and necessary being-associated or being-together. Good relations generate well-being and thus any politic of welfare. It's good, in conclusion, to recall Adorno's idea of happiness, mentioned in *Minima Moralia*⁶²: to be in a *good relation* means to "be encompassed" by

61 Hartmut Rosa, *The uncontrollability of the world* (Wiley: New York 2020), 31-35.

62 "To happiness the same applies as to truth: one does not have it, but is in it.

it. Any form of social relation claims for its intrinsic *good* realization in order to satisfy its components and individuals.

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Indeed, happiness is nothing other than being encompassed, an after-image of the original shelter within the mother. But for this reason, no-one who is happy can know that he is so. To see happiness, he would have to pass out of it: to be as if already born. He who says he is happy lies, and in invoking happiness, sins against it. He alone keeps faith who says: I was happy. The only relation of consciousness to happiness is gratitude: in which lies its incomparable dignity", Theodor Adorno, *Minima moralia. Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London and New York: Verso 2006), 104.

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