



Simmel and the Möbius Strip

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LORENZO BARBANERA

Simmel and the Möbius Strip.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

(T.S. Eliot)

If one were to sum up in one word all the qualities of Georg Simmel's thought, that word would be “persistence”. Indeed, the German sociologist's theorizing has continued to germinate on both fruitful and inhospitable grounds over the time, so that often, even when no one would expect it, it is easy to find oneself on Simmel's trail or, as a famous saying goes, on his shoulders. In addition to providing evidence of his acumen in grasping the fundamental elements that make society possible, this also allows us to appreciate the transversality of his ideas and insights (Lombardo, 2015: 13). They are able to transcend not only the different theoretical and methodological approaches in sociology, but also the limitations associated with the historicity of thought, which maintains its fertility without time limits.

These premises make it possible to analyze Simmel from multiple different perspectives while at the same time trying to

understand the unifying meaning of his work (Helle, 2009: 3). This is perhaps the most complex challenge for Simmel's students, since the texts he bequeathed to us tend to present themselves in an idiosyncratic form, characterized by a rich, purple writing style, with plenty of exemplifications and references to concrete situations that, while clarifying some ambiguities, also make the prose rather jagged, not always linear. On the other hand, it is possible to identify some recurring concepts in Simmel's arguments that constitute a kind of gravity points (Fornari, 2005: 86). Consider for example the notions of *wechselseitigkeit* (reciprocal action) and *vergesellschaftung* (sociation). These and other concepts provide orientation for those who, as the authors of *Ritorno a Simmel*¹ – the volume which inspires this critical note – aim at enhancing the German sociologist's legacy from the perspective of its present and future implications.

However, the process of valorization hides some pitfalls due precisely to the multifaceted character of Simmel's legacy, which Lombardo has aptly defined as a «legacy without a will» (2015: 12). In fact, he himself was aware of the uncertain fate his studies would have met, as the following quote which Levine mentions from one of his diaries shows: «my legacy will be like cash, distributed to many heirs, each transforming his part into use according to his nature» (1971: XIII). As it is virtually always the case in situations such as the present one, there are many paths that can be taken, but only some of them allow to maintain an authentic link with the starting point. Other ones, conversely, easily lead away from it, by dissolving it into theories and research practices that are not fully consistent with the fundamental ideas expressed by the Berlin sociologist. Moreover, this issue recurs fairly frequently in the literature, in which the tendency of some scholars to misrepresent – or at least to interpret his work too freely – is highlighted (Fitzi, 2016: 60; D'Andrea, 2009: 229; Jazbinsek, 2003).

¹ The title can be translated as “Back to Simmel”.

But how is it possible to prevent this from happening? First, it may be useful to bear in mind what characterizes Simmel's sociology, namely a focus on the processual structure of society, composed of innumerable threads that «are woven at every moment, allowed to fall, are taken up again, substituted for others, and interwoven with others» (Simmel, 2009 [1908]: 33). As it is obvious, an essential feature of processuality is its unceasingness. It should be stressed that this term is intended to indicate not only the fact that all elements of the social are constantly changing, but also that they experience a dialectical relationship of mutual structuring. Such a configuration does not designate a linear path, but rather entails an undulating, often circular or even recursive process, which leaves no room for any form of definitive crystallization of the social, much less the discovery of sociological laws comparable to those of the natural sciences. Hence, rather than focusing on the creation of general theories by which one can explain reality by deduction, Simmel works by induction. He is one of the progenitors of those sociologists who «employed induction without switching to deduction. They proceeded not by finding their general themes in particular phenomena but by continuing to examine particular phenomena to discover their general themes» (Davis, 1997: 372).

In accordance with what was previously said, his argumentative style makes extensive use of specific examples that are developed at the micro level; small phenomena of everyday life which, however, always maintain an original connection to the broader concept they are meant to illustrate. This continuous shift from the particular to the general may unintentionally induce one to go beyond Simmel, but apart from Simmel. Indeed, as Davis argues, «the drawback of continual induction is confusion, for the general idea produced by leaping from one instance to the whole does not always fit together clearly with the general idea produced by leaping from another instance to the whole» (ivi: 373).

Considering these objective difficulties, works such as *Ritorno a Simmel* certainly deserve praise for their courage in following the German sociologist's thought in an original way, analyzing, starting

from the latter, such narrowly topical phenomena as gender inequality in STEM disciplines, study career after high school or job placement of young people. Proceeding along this way gives concrete proof of the significance of Simmel's work in constituting the initial reference for infinite paths of analysis. More difficult, on the other hand, is to find oneself with Simmel at the end of the path, as would require precisely the processual and recursive approach that, as mentioned, distinguishes all his work. Now, an instance may help one to further clarify this point. One of the contributions in the volume uses the Simmelian conception of the notion of conflict to study the increasing instability of marital relationships. In particular, the rise in separations and divorces is interpreted as an indicator of a radical change in couple relationships, which would now be marked by a personal will focused on the selfish satisfaction of one's needs, especially of a sexual nature. This consideration is presented «as in line with what Simmel also expounded»² (D'ambrosio, 2015: 83), although, actually, some doubts could be risen about it.

In this regard, a passage in the *Fragment on love* claims the altruistic nature of the feeling of love, and thus rules out the possibility that there can be a merely instrumental type of relationship, in which the partner is regarded as a means to one's own purposes. It depends on the fact that

the loving person as loving dissociate himself from every authentic utilitarian relationship, from the hedonistic as well as the egoistic. The moral and altruistic relationship can only be connected with his condition, which is always a state of being and not a state of action. Similarly, a purposive relationship to the species is alien to him as well (Simmel, 1984 [1921]: 169-170).

² This quote was translated from Italian. In the original language the phrase is: «in linea con quanto esposto anche da Simmel».

Therefore, referring to Simmel's thought, it does not seem entirely legitimate to think of marriage as a form of sociation in which the willingness on the part of the individual to self-determine independently of the other prevails. In a nutshell, «for Simmel, love overcomes the dichotomy between selfishness and altruism» (Cataldi, 2018: 104). Moreover, from a more general point of view, already in *Sociology* the author describes the condition of the individual in modern times as largely dependent on others, to such an extent that, paradoxically, it is possible to preserve one's individuality «only insofar as one yields a portion of one's absolute 'I'» (Simmel, 1908: 630). In fact, although the Simmelian social actor always maintains a certain degree of agency, he is never a pure monad, but the sum and product of a variety of factors. As a child of modernity, he lives constantly immersed in ever-changing networks of relationships and thus he himself is mobile, fluid, and malleable. All this makes him dependent on others, even when he claims his own autonomy.

As we have seen, it is easy to get lost in Simmel's erratic thought, which is nevertheless built on certain guidelines that, once identified, can be employed as a kind of compass. One of the most important of these is undoubtedly the attitude of considering the macrosocial and microsocial dimensions jointly, i.e., as an indivisible phenomenal unity whose components are inextricably connected and constantly evolving. Consequently, the task of sociology as an autonomous science is to focus attention on the molecular elements of becoming that represent the fundamental constituents of historical-cultural reality. Though at the micro level, these elements allow for the analysis of forms relating to behaviors which, being universal, give rise to processes that spill over into the macro dimension and vice versa. In the light of these central assumptions within Simmel's sociology, one comes to the conclusion that both micro and macro dimensions are coessential, since they coexist in the individual and in the society that he or she helps to create when he or she enters into relationship with other individuals. In this

sense, micro and macro can be considered separately only for analytical needs, but not from an ontological point of view.

This peculiar way of looking at reality makes Simmel a true pioneer of a certain approach to understanding society that was to develop over the years giving life to the sociological currents later merged into interactionism³ (Smith, 2017; Low, 2008). In this regard, it is not surprising that his work never received adequate recognition while he was still alive, or even in the years immediately following his death. Only in the late 1970s and especially the early 1980s, coinciding with the development of computer technologies and the first software for statistical analysis of social networks, did scholars begin to better understand the heuristic potential of his theorizing (Bročić and Silver, 2021). From this period on, his fundamental concepts began to find application and feedback in empirical research activity. Simmel's insistence on the concept of *wechselwirkung* combined with the analysis of social circles opens up new perspectives for the study of macro-phenomena. Thus, his intellectual legacy begins to spread among the “many heirs”, by going beyond the instances of the interactionist school. In fact, the possibility of explaining events at the macro level through micro-social dynamics contributes to the birth and establishment of today's analytical sociology (Spinello, 2015).

These very brief historical notes help to better understand the crux of the matter. While it is true that Simmel can be subject to multiple interpretations, the system of relations between micro and macro that gives shape to an endless dynamic of construction and structuring of society is a cornerstone of his work. This is a basic principle that encapsulates a rather precise view of the connection between the individual and society. It is explained very well in *Ritorno a Simmel* by Giovannini, who perfectly grasps its nature by proposing, moreover, a very interesting parallel with Bourdieu's

³ Actually, it is fair to say that there is not unanimous agreement that Simmel is a precursor of interactionism. Collins, for example, includes him among the conflict theorists, albeit very critically (see Collins, 1985).

contribute, and referring in particular to his concept of habitus. In essence, each acting subject internalizes the social structures where he lives, which contribute to the formation of his individuality. At the same time, he is in turn able to intervene in the external structures in order to produce a changing within them. Through this continuous process, there is an interpenetration between individual and society, micro and macro, linked by a relation of mutuality that becomes completely inextricable (Giovannini, 2015: 142-145). Ultimately, all this means that «the person is never a purely collective being and never a purely individual one» (Simmel, 1908: 630).

Most interestingly, the circularity that is assumed in describing the system of relations between subject and social structure is reflected, by analogy, throughout Simmel's work. Indeed, as Davis points out, he may be considered «the first postmodernist social thinker» (1997: 373), since he does not seek linearity at all costs, but rather is open to the fragmentary, contamination and reflexivity of thought, continually urged to return to itself in order to preserve its capacity to unlock new horizons. Now, keeping true to this simile, it is possible to depict the essence of his legacy precisely by means of a geometric element: the Möbius strip. In its own way, it is a peculiar and revolutionary figure, as it breaks boundaries both literally and figuratively. In fact, its characteristic feature is that it is a non-orientable surface, i.e., it lacks a dividing line between an inside and an outside, which become the same thing. By virtue of this, it breaks the boundaries of discipline by moving out from the patterns of the known to unleash a new creative force, just like Simmel. But that is not all. If one imagines to walk on a Möbius strip, no one could tell in which direction he or she is going, because anyone who walks away is bound to go back, only to start again and return, again, in an endless process that becomes a mirror of the social reality and heritage that the Berlin sociologist left us as a gift. Thus, in order not to get lost in his legacy, we have to make sure that we are on the Möbius strip, that we go beyond Simmel to go back to Simmel.

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