



# Love and Marriage in Georg Simmel's Work. A Nineteenth-Century Post-Romantic?

Zeyda Rodríguez Morales

Volume 25, Number 2, 2021

Simmel and Love

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088069ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1088069ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN

1616-2552 (print)

2512-1022 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Rodríguez Morales, Z. (2021). Love and Marriage in Georg Simmel's Work. A Nineteenth-Century Post-Romantic? *Simmel Studies*, 25(2), 213–241. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1088069ar>

Article abstract

*The main purpose of this text is to address two crucial aspects of Georg Simmel's work: the originality of his sociological approach, as well as his conception of love feelings. To undertake this task, I will take as a frame of reference a fundamental cultural construction of his time, romantic love. I will try to show that although some of Simmel's ideas about love can be seen as a product of the prevailing mentality, others do not fit with this imaginary, and in my opinion, they are avant-garde and post-romantic because they freely propose different parameters to think, feel and engage into amorous relationships.*

ZEYDA RODRÍGUEZ MORALES

*Love and Marriage in Georg Simmel's Work. A Nineteenth-Century Post-Romantic?*

---

*Abstract. The main purpose of this text is to address two crucial aspects of Georg Simmel's work: the originality of his sociological approach, as well as his conception of love feelings. To undertake this task, I will take as a frame of reference a fundamental cultural construction of his time, romantic love. I will try to show that although some of Simmel's ideas about love can be seen as a product of the prevailing mentality, others do not fit with this imaginary, and in my opinion, they are avant-garde and post-romantic because they freely propose different parameters to think, feel and engage into amorous relationships.*

---

Exploring the work of the German philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel is challenging because of the unusual range of themes throughout his work. Nevertheless, it is also an enjoyable experience because of his essay style, which reveals an unusual intellectual freedom inviting multiple paths of inquiry. The interest that inspired this paper was to discover the way this author approached matters related to the feeling of love, through varied, interconnected themes.<sup>1</sup> The main purpose of this text is to address two crucial aspects of Georg Simmel's work: the originality of his

---

<sup>1</sup> A detailed, careful paper that shows the legacy of Simmelian ideas as well as the ways they can be redefined in the light of theories about contemporary love, has been written by Olga Sabido Ramos (2015).

sociological approach as well as of his conception of loving feelings. To undertake this task, I will take as a reference framework a fundamental cultural construction of his time, *romantic love*. I will attempt to show that although some of Simmel's ideas about love can be seen as a product of the prevailing mentality, another does not fit with this imaginary<sup>2</sup> and in my opinion are avant-garde because they freely propose different parameters to think, feel and engage in amorous relationships. I shall refer to them as post-romantic ideas in which his constant concern about individuality appears repeatedly.<sup>3</sup>

I will organize the discussion into the following sections. The first provides the reasons for considering that his views as a philosopher and sociologist are highly original; the second describes the cultural context of his time by emphasizing the concept of romantic love, marriage, and gender distinctions. I will then go on to explain his ideas grouped into various sets: those related to the feeling of love and sexuality and those on intimacy, marriage, and secrets. I will explore his views on fidelity, infidelity, and adventure, and continue with his views on femininity and masculinity and the relationship between the sexes, and end with some final reflections.

---

<sup>2</sup> I mean by the concept of imaginary the set of meanings, values, concepts, and idealizations that nourish the concept of romantic love and that explain its norms, practices, feelings, and emotions.

<sup>3</sup> Zeyda Rodriguez published two papers that develop the approach to romantic and post-romantic imaginary and its analytical potential in 2006 and 2019.

## The Originality of Simmel's approach

Georg Simmel's work has recently been reappraised in the sociological field, beginning in the 1980s, and the enormous value placed on it by specialists has earned the author recognition as a "late classic". (Sabido and Zabłudovsky, 2016) When one encounters his thoughts, the avant gardism with which he reflects on certain topics addressed much later by sociology, such as love, eroticism, coquetry, the differences between the sexes, marriage, conflict, and the senses of hearing and sight, is astonishing. As he himself says at the beginning of his text on erotica (Levine, 1971), the most neglected of subjects in philosophy has been love, as though it were an incidental thing unworthy of the philosophical endeavor. It was to this subject that he was to devote many of his reflections.

Equally astounding is the epistemological perspective of his vision, which highlights the importance of the microscopic phenomena of social life. The emergence of this tradition is usually attributed to the work of the Austrian sociologist Alfred Schütz, who brings together the Weberian legacy of a comprehensive sociology that focuses on interpreting the meaning individuals assign to their actions (Max Weber, 1864-1920), with phenomenological philosophy, in which *die Lebenswelt* is identified as the setting in which the dialogue that establishes meaning between human beings and the world takes place (Edmund Husserl, 1859-1938).

However, unlike the phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schütz, the social dramaturgy of Erving Goffman, and the ethnomethodology of Harold Garfinkel, whose works were published in the second half of the 20th century – except for Schütz's early work *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt*, issued in 1932 – Simmel's works were produced between the last decade of the 19th century and 1918. Simmel was a contemporary of Emile

Durkheim, who brought out his most important works in the last decade of the 19th century, and of Max Weber, who did so during the first two decades of the 20th century. All three died within the space of a few years: Durkheim in 1917, Simmel in 1918, and Weber in 1920.

Simmel's perspective on the constitution of society is found in *Sociology. Inquiries into the construction of social forms* [1908] (2009), which clearly outlines an individualistic approach. For Simmel, society emerges when several individuals engage in reciprocal action; these individual actions arise from certain instincts or ends. And this mutual influence lends them unity and creates society. It is striking that *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der Verstehenden Soziologie*, by his colleague and friend Max Weber, containing a similar position on the definition of sociology as a science that seeks to understand (verstehen) human action as well as explain it (erklären), was published in 1922, 14 years after *Sociology*. Whereas Simmel places the pursuit of ends at the center of social actions, Weber does so by emphasizing the meanings individuals place on these actions, while being guided by the actions of others.<sup>4</sup>

In his text *Grundfragen der Soziologie. Individuum und Gesellschaft* (1917), Simmel argues that there are two central concepts to understanding human societies, that of content and form. The former, considered the “material of life” is the engine of socialization and refers to the impulse, interest, purpose, inclination, and psychic state, all of which produces an effect on others and receive other effects. These contents are guided by the will, intelligence, and feelings of individuals, which give them certain forms that make them work

---

<sup>4</sup> Gina Zabłudovsky (2007) has written a paper addressing the similarities and differences between Georg Simmel and Max Weber.

and that allow them to solve practical needs. In his text *Excursus on Fidelity and Gratitude* (Simmel, [1908] 2009) Simmel adds the concept of second-order forms, those that function as support for social relations forms that are born and last in societies. Gratitude and fidelity are good examples of second-order forms that in this case support love relationships.<sup>5</sup>

Another concept organically linked to that of society is socialization. For this author, socialization describes this coupling and uncoupling of individuals as a continuous toing and froing. And macroscopic systems are configured based on these microscopic-molecular processes. Another way of referring to this process is when he states that society links or weaves together “the delicate threads of the minimal relationships between men,” in whose repetition “great organisms” of an objective nature are founded, which shape history itself. Esteban Vernik describes this attempt to search for the initial signs that point to great discoveries as “a principle of connection between the superficial level of the observable in everyday life and the level of ultimate values. The point would be to find the totality of their meaning in each of the details of life” (Vernik, 2007: 18).

---

<sup>5</sup> However, Sween Seebach (2017) argues broadly that from the end of the 19th century, love should be considered a second-order form. He claims that not only does Simmel’s description of a second-order form fit with love as an empirical phenomenon, but that love, has overtaken crucial durability-providing functions in our society. Furthermore, Seebach holds that “Simmel’s and Canto-Milà’s reflections on second-order forms have pointed out that second-order forms link individual and social spheres, emotional and relational parts, and take part in the creation of a second order form memory, perpetuated in rituals. That is how second-order forms guarantee that certain moments, events, emotions, relations and processes attain a durability beyond their scope.” (p. 77) We can relate such claims with the special attention that Eve Illouz has paid to love rituals in late capitalism in her text *Consuming the romantic utopia. Love and the cultural contradictions of capitalism* (1992).

Although Simmel clearly observes the link between the macro and micro levels, his fundamental theoretical concern is clearly stated. He suggests paying attention to the insignificant relationships between individuals: motivations, feelings, and thoughts, while distancing himself from a psychological perspective on them. In general, the overarching theme of individualism is a constant in his work. On numerous occasions, Simmel confirms a general principle in this regard that can be expressed as follows: the individuality of being and doing grows since the social circles around the individual expand and become more complex (Levine, 1971). This author often confirms that there are increasing margins for the creation of specific forms, in other words, forms that are created anew by subjects transforming inherited forms.

In this sense, especially interesting is the text by Simmel entitled "On the sociology of the family," (1998) in which he reflects on the relationship between marriage and feelings of love, among other issues. From a historical perspective, Simmel finds that monogamy is an instinctual attitude in human beings, as it occurs in other animal species. He explains that the regulations surrounding conjugal relations have increasingly pointed in that direction and that the causes have their origin in economic and social conditions unrelated to feelings of fidelity and the desire to remain with each other for life. On the contrary, says Simmel, these feelings developed because of the configuration of this social form, achieving a correspondence between the fulfillment of social purposes and the emergence of these individual motivations. In his approach, he refers to the time when marriage was arranged, attempting to satisfy the interests of each of the parties, and how the link between love was something that happened later. In other words, marriage was the cause of the emergence of love and then this formula was reversed, with love being the origin of and motivation for marriage at the individual level.

It is striking that in his text, Simmel fails to mention the term “romantic love”. His argument characterizes the historical arrival of this new concept that includes the institution of marriage with the values of fidelity and monogamy, but he does not call it that. The way he explores these issues in “On the sociology of the family” differs from those I will address in the rest of this article because it is situated in a more abstract dimension, one that links the gestation of marriage as a specific social form that produces the legitimation of moral norms, which, in turn, promote the emergence of feelings at a subjective level.

The relevance that this author gives to individualism not only has an explanatory intention of the development of modern societies and within every sphere of social life, but also constitutes an ideal for Simmel, a stage which he pursues and yearns for affectively. This attention to the individual also includes reflections on what he calls psychic life, in other words, characteristics of a kind of “human nature.” Within his text on conflict (Simmel, [1908] 2009), Simmel outlines the existence of “a single flow” within subjects that contains mixed feelings, a juxtaposition of drives and a convergence of opposite impressions, all forming part of the same affective unit. In this respect, erotic relationships are seen as a network of love and respect, love and harmony, love, and the need for dominance, with the two converging tendencies forming part of the same psyche. On another occasion, on the subject of fidelity, Simmel adds that people’s interiority fluctuates. They live in a state of continuous change and flux, such that being changing beings is also part of this psychic life.

### **Cultural context: romantic love, marriage, and gender distinctions**

The ideas about the feeling of love prevailing at the time when Georg Simmel’s life was unfolding in Germany fully correspond to



a romantic imaginary about love. The set of idealizations included in this imaginary were conceived even before the 19th century, but it was during this time that they were consolidated, and amalgamated a series of traditions around love that Irving Singer synthesizes around two traditions, one spiritual, the other realistic, which are combined in romanticism. According to this great historian of love, he takes romantic love from Plato and the Neoplatonists, together with the search for purity in a love that transcends ordinary sexual experience; the notion of an interpersonal love that allows the lover to share divinity from Christianity; and the aim of justifying sexuality between man and woman as something that is comparable to religious love from courtly love (Singer, 1984). This was followed by the addition of the idea of “empathic identification,” awakened through imagination and the conception that love is a metaphysical longing for unity and fusion with the other, eliminating the barriers between one person and the next. Romantic love celebrates love as the highest value, while for key authors within this imaginary, such as William Shakespeare, love achieves its fulfilment in the very act of marriage.

This linking of love and the institution of marriage constituted a true revolution because it had thitherto been conceived of in terms of economic and social convenience and had been separated from sentimental logic (Stone, 1979). The link between the feeling of love and marriage would give romantic love an unprecedented strength. Here, affections and spiritual love are placed above sexual attraction, elevating the union between spouses to a sacred level. In this respect, falling in love is not a carnal attraction but “love at first sight,” an image that is accompanied by the idea of the eternity of love, even beyond death, as depicted in the well-known play *Romeo and Juliet*. Following the inclusion of love in marriage, great expectations would be based on it, such as personal satisfaction, intimacy, sexual satisfaction, and mutual happiness for the spouses.

The consolidation of the concept of romantic love also implied the progressive decline of the role of the family of origin and the community, in the decision of finding a mate and marriage, expanding the margins of their personal decision, within which experiencing the feeling of love occupied an increasingly large space. However, the criteria of economic and social convenience did not completely disappear. In that respect, romantic love contributed to the growth of individualism throughout the development of modern societies by making room for personal choices and feelings within the choice of a partner yet did so in paradoxically in conjunction with another concept, the ideal of fusion with the other, resulting from mutual surrender once love has been made. In this way, the margin of individual initiatives expands but only during the period prior to marriage. Once the union has been celebrated, it narrows and adjusts behaviors to the canons established by gender roles, particularly for women.

The definition of gender roles within the couple relationship was already well established by the beginning of the 19th century. It was based on a theory of gender differentiation, which supported the complementarity between functions. In other words, each sex had different skills and capacities, and both had to be appreciated on their own terms, creating a mutual dependence that would enable them to achieve marital happiness. A sexual division of labor was thereby outlined: women were to dedicate themselves full time to housework, which was seen as an act of love and devotion, rather than as an economic contribution to the survival of the family unit; while men were to exchange their labor force in the salaried labor market, becoming providers unrelated to the domestic world (Coontz, 2006).

This distinction was accompanied by an attribution of feelings that was also different: men were conceived as more suitable for the rational and active outside world, whereas women were regarded as more capable than their male partners of undertaking

humanitarian and caring tasks, in which tenderness, understanding and compassion were crucial. Accompanying these distinctions, another idealization gained currency: that of women oblivious to sexual desires or impulses who displayed qualities such as chastity, purity, and self-control. Women were thought to be disinterested in sex, desexualized, dispassionate, as well as responsible for controlling the impulses of the men close to them and regarded as “sick” if they experienced too much pleasure (Coontz, 2006). Giddens has described this combination of idealizations in romantic love as a plot hatched by men against women. Once married, they are relegated to the home, their tasks are perfectly defined and their moral status is based on the fulfillment of the latter, while their sexuality is banished if they wish to conform to the stereotype of a “good” woman (Giddens, 1992).

The ideas on the issues of love, marriage, and the relationship between the sexes found in Simmel’s work are framed in the cultural context outlined above. However, the contexts refer to the hegemonic tendencies that characterize the culture prevailing in a certain historical space and time, although this does not prevent the existence of singularities that show clear differences from these regularities. I will refer to such singularities using the term of “post-romantic ideas”, just as I mentioned at the beginning of this work. Among these stand out: the breaking of the inherited generic role scheme, which gives rise to role negotiations inside the couple, inspired by a criterion of efforts equality; other ones are to demonstrate love by respecting the development of the individuality of each other, as well as to consider that sexuality is a fundamental element in unions and that its satisfaction is essential for the relationship; finally, there are two more ideas, that commitment degree is variable and does not necessarily imply marriage, and that love relationship depends on the duration of the loving feeling and not on the fulfillment of principles such as the preservation of the

family. (Rodríguez, 2006) Throughout the exposition of Simmel's ideas, I will point out those that clearly adhere to the paradigm of romantic love of his time and those that break with it and can be interpreted as avant-garde.

A brief look at Simmel's intimate life allows us to observe that his own relationship as a couple, his ties with close friends, as well as the biographical trajectories of some of them are far from traditional romantic idealizations. Three examples that must be highlighted are those of his own wife, Gertrud Kinel, writer, painter, and philosopher; that of Marianne Weber, sociologist, feminist, and wife of Max Weber, and that of Lou Andreas-Salomé, an intellectual of his time, who was one of his admirers. (Sabido, 2015, Vernik, 2007) These women were not only thinkers and authors of relevant works in the world of philosophy, but they also established relationships of equality and camaraderie with their partners, which did not correspond to the typical female generic role. Likewise, two close friends can be mentioned who grew intellectually under his protection, developing intellectual projects with autonomy, the poet Gertrud Kantorowicz, with whom he had a daughter, and Margarete Susman. (Rammstedt, 2015)

### **The feeling of love and sexuality**

Simmel's concept of the feeling of love far exceeds his specific text on the subject called *On love (a fragment)*, (Oakes, 1984). The feeling of love comes from a subjective need that constitutes a content that assumes its social form in marriage. Linking love with the sexual impulse is an attempt to build a "false bridge," although he recognizes that this statement cannot be completely rejected. Feeling pleasure and guaranteeing the reproduction of the species are intertwined in the sexual impulse. When you love someone, you completely rule out having sex with another person because you have a passionate longing for them. In this respect, Simmel declares,

there is no doubt that the pre-form of love is configured in the attraction of the sexes.

To begin with, for this author, love is an unsubstantiated primary category because the person who is loved does not need to have any specific quality or motive. They are loved simply in the way God is, because He is who He is. Before being loved, the person does not exist as someone extraordinary; love creates them from the moment they are loved. In this respect, feelings are created in subjective life. They are originated by the individual who loves and once they love, experiences this feeling as being-trapped by something, being-governed by a force that comes from without.

Love is the feeling, he declares, “that is more closely and unconditionally bound to its object than any other feeling”. Hence, whoever loves is considered exceptional and unique. However, and Simmel does not attach much importance to this, the production of the feeling of love towards someone is mediated by “what is worthy of being admired,” which leads us to consider, even minimally, the social and cultural influence on the configuration of the feeling of love, a dimension highlighted by subsequent authors such as Anthony Giddens (1992), Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1990).

Revealing his individualistic position, for Simmel, love has a *tragic* streak since there is a fundamental contradiction between the feeling of love itself, experienced in a personal way, and the intense desire to achieve fusion with the other, a deeply romantic ideal that encourages people to have an “uninterrupted continuation” with each other. Considering it tragic highlights the opinion of this author in this regard.

On the other hand, in his text on conflict (Simmel, [1908] 2009), Simmel considers love an instinct that must be satisfied, which makes it spontaneous, intense, and determined. Particularly in

youth, the soul needs to love and chooses and even adorns, he says, the object that satisfies his need. And conversely, he adds, when people grow older, the feeling of love is enhanced. In his text on happiness in *Snapshots sub specie aeternitatis*, (Simmel [1901-1902] 2012) he reflects on the difference between youth and old age. When talking about his stay at the house of a couple, Simmel sees them hugging, “with a passion, an impetuosity, a mutual devotion, as if they were young now.” This embrace revealed their total possession of each other, all the deeper and more secret because they never did so in public. And he adds that, for young people, this passion is impersonal because it can be enjoyed by many others, whereas for older people, in old age, there is only one human being to whom to give and from whom to receive, which is the essence of happiness.

In his text *Eros, platonic and modern*, in Levine (1971), Simmel elaborates on the differences in the experience of love in modern times when talking about ancient Greece. Unlike Plato, for whom love arises from the contemplation of the beauty a person possesses in which the principle of absolute and substantial beauty is revealed, for Simmel, the love we feel for someone causes us to see them as beautiful; they become beautiful as a result of our love.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, love is oriented by the individuality and uniqueness of someone in particular, not by any being in which beauty is manifested. You love someone not because of their attributes, but because they are them, and love survives the disappearance of the former. Likewise, unlike the Greeks for whom love occurs between peers, old men, and young men, in the modern world, he says, this feeling takes place between those who are different and

---

<sup>6</sup> This resembles Max Weber’s approach to the attribution of charismatic qualities to the leader without the latter’s possessing any extraordinary characteristics.

complementary, whom we assume to be straight men and women, a value that is also present in romantic love. In this way, he continues, love produces relationships between people, rather than between the earthly and the divine.

In short, for Simmel, individuality distinguishes Platonic from modern eroticism. Love is the side of an existing relationship in the subject whose goal is to be reciprocated.

### **Intimacy, marriage, and secrets**

Regarding the feeling of love Simmel posits various ideas about intimacy, intimate relationships, and the space for individuality within them, in which the importance of secrets emerges. In his text on quantity in social groups (Simmel, [1908] 2009), the author posits that the intimate nature of a relationship is based on considering that each one has a unique and exclusive quality that is the fundamental value of its existence, even if this is not true. This idea confirms his individualistic view of the social, since it considers the existence of an area that occurs through the mere fact of being one individual next to another, without considering that together they constitute a supra-individual unit for this reason. This experience of uniqueness is extremely valuable and is destroyed by the irruption of a third party, even when that person is the result of the union between two people who love each other, in other words, a child. In this respect, romantic ideals about achieving fusion with the other and the fact that this relationship bears fruit in the conception of children, are seen from the point of view of loss, of a break with an experience in which being autonomous constitutes wealth .

This experience of individuality is appreciated by Simmel at various points in his works. When speaking of intimacy, he often refers to it with a sense of nostalgia or absence, as happens, from

his point of view, with marriage. Simmel believes that the fact that two beings wish to unite through marriage “goes beyond the conscious and is inexplicable for rational reasons.” His vision of this social form is severe. For him, it constitutes the most intimate relationship that has been defined historically and socially in its content and in its form to such a degree that there is nothing inherently individual in it. This social form coming from outside, marriage, deprives individuals of their freedom. In addition, he adds, there are usually certain feelings towards those we are close to in space, “Both sublime happiness and unbearable violence.” And to complicate matters, he adds, the marriage relationship is perverse: spouses share the intimacies of day-to-day life, weaknesses hidden from others. At the same time, what we reveal of our personality to the social sphere, to others, the objective and most important part of our personality, is eliminated from that relationship. For Simmel, the view of marriage as an institution hampers development and prevents the enrichment of individuals. Contemporary questions about this same institution and the search for more flexible, authentic, alternative formulas (cohabitation, free union) seem to coincide with these approaches.

In his text on the philosophy of love included in *Snapshots sub specie aeternitatis*, (Simmel [1901-1902] 2012), Simmel expands his reflections on the values related to marriage. In this case, the duration of the feeling of love. The author claims that it is wrong to believe that the intensity of a feeling should be measured by its duration. The reverse is also true, because since its duration is short, it is believed to lack intensity and purity. For this reason, he adds, he finds the conclusion that all authentic, true love should find its unique and natural expression in marriage false. Once again, a cherished value of romanticism such as finding love for life and for the union of the spouses to last “until death do them part” does not seem to appeal to our author.



His criticism of the social form of marriage is categorical in predicting that the differentiation process of modern culture tends to downplay the quality of the duration of love and attributes it to other qualities. And, he adds, this may lead to the redefinition of the form of marriage and even to new unsuspected forms of being a couple, unthinkable up to now, declaring that “just as it was impossible, in the age of slave labor, to imagine the wage labor of the machinist industry.” These words by Simmel are among his best known since they highlight his historical and mutable vision of the forms of the feeling of love and show great openness to the invention of new practices and social forms. As Sabido (2015: 211-212) points out, one avant-garde idea in Simmel concerns the ephemeral, which is making its way into the experiences of subjects in modern societies and is common in contemporary theorizations that underline the fact that human bonds are becoming less durable and stable, as well as more fragile, to quote Zygmunt Bauman.

One aspect related to these issues is the issue of secrecy, an issue that Simmel attaches importance to especially in his work on forms of socialization (Simmel, [1908] 2009). In this case, the nature of psychic life described earlier is used to explain that the existence of secrets is inherent to individuals and that they are positive in human relationships. And, he adds, we do not show anyone the causal process of our states of the soul, since it is incoherent and irrational; we only reveal a careful selection of them.

Apropos of these reflections, he expands his conception of intimacy we discussed earlier. From his point of view, intimate relationships lose their charm if they do not include distance and pauses at the same time. Mutual knowledge also presupposes a certain ignorance, a dose of dissimulation. In this respect, the lie is a positive structural element of relationships and has a sociological importance, even if it is ethically judged. And the tools of lies are secrecy and concealment.

Transferring this issue to the field of relationships within marriage, Simmel observes a new point of conflict, as he declares that the balance between communication and reserve with its complements, intrusion, and discretion, is much more difficult to determine in this social way. In marriage, it is tempting to lose yourself totally in each other, the famous romantic fusion, which threatens the future of the relationship. Simmel argues that those who give everything unconditionally “spend their capital” and one day find themselves out of pocket, as they experience the risk that “the Dionysian enjoyment of giving will leave behind hardship.” And he declares, in the form of a recommendation, that absolute psychological knowledge of the other must be avoided because that cools and paralyzes vitality. The depth of relationships should respect “the last alcove beyond the last revelation,” you must regain what you already have daily. And he concludes, in accordance with his desire to recover individuality, that the secret is one of the greatest conquests of humanity.

### *Conflict and reconciliation in marriage*

Conflict within marriage is an issue Simmel touches on in his text *Female culture* (Oakes, 1984). In his view, it is normal for marriages to have disagreement, distancing, and arguments, because this is organically linked to the elements that enable them to survive and it is in that combination that two people form a unit. In this way, opposition is part of a relationship, not only as a means of preserving it but as a function of it.

On the other hand, Simmel believes that when one is in a couple relationship, the whole personality focuses on that, which magnifies disagreements, which is why violence sometimes rears its ugly head. This depth of involvement in the couple means that the other person is conceived of as our equal, which is why members of a couple who have been very close in a deep relationship project “their entire being” onto arguments, which can lead to a break-up.

Consequently, admitting that a very intense relationship was a mistake is humiliating because it undermines one's identity. In that respect, the feeling of one's own guilt hides behind the hatred projected onto the other. For this author, marriage is a union which, like no other, can withstand bitter hatred, radical antipathies, clashes, and continuous offenses. At the same time, it is so delicate that a small fissure or a harsh word "can undo all the beauty of the relationship" which no amount of will can repair.

Simmel's reflection on marital conflicts extends to the period of separation, and he believes that when this happens, it opens the possibility of reconciliation. This can occur by making a renewed commitment or by forgiving each other. If the latter occurs, redressing grievances takes time and from his point of view, a person who forgets too quickly shows frivolity and insensitivity. Conversely, when reconciliation takes place slowly, it allows the values of the union to be highlighted, and reinforces intimacy and mutual understanding, since it becomes aware of the risks of a second break-up, which would be final. Couples who break up and get back together again several times become a caricature. Separation is a process which, for Simmel, "can only happen once, otherwise it loses its dignity and relevance." Finally, when a couple fails to achieve reconciliation, it means that the soul of one of its members has suffered the amputation of a member and that something inside them died during the conflict, which is the opposite of forgiveness.

### **Fidelity, infidelity, and adventure**

On the subject of fidelity and infidelity Simmel reveals one of his most avant-garde facets. In his text *Excursus on Fidelity and Gratitude* (Simmel, [1908] 2009), he places enormous importance on these social forms, regarding them as second-order forms, in other words,

they constitute the basis of various kinds of relationship that go beyond the realm of loving. In short, for Simmel, without fidelity, society could not exist for a long time, in the way it does. Fidelity is a mental and sociological state that ensures the endurance of a bond, even after the forces that produced it have disappeared, and which survives these forces.

This power explains the soul's ability to continue along a path within interpersonal relationships, even after having overcome the shock that pushed it on that path. Without this binding power of associations, society would collapse, so therefore, fidelity gives society stability. Considering it a second-order form is also based on the fact that it is a state of the soul independent of the subjects that support it and the contents of the relationship.

In another of his works on infidelity (Simmel, [1901-1902] 2012), the author naturally posits that people evolve and that they are not the same over time, in line with his view of psychic life described above. And in this respect, he wonders whether it can be a moral obligation to maintain the effect when the cause has disappeared. And, he adds, should we or even can we maintain fidelity at the cost of being unfaithful to ourselves?

This perspective is completely outside the romantic love imaginary that would establish being faithful to the other person as a fundamental norm, not only as a relational prescription but as a form of evaluation of the moral probity of each one, particularly of women.

However, he returns to the postulates of romanticism when he bases his argument about fidelity in his text *Female culture* (Oakes, 1984), on an almost physiological reasoning. For Simmel, women are much more faithful than men because in the former, the periphery is more united to the center and the parts more intricately linked to the whole. He calls this the unitary nature of the female soul. In contrast, what makes men more prone to infidelity is their ability to split into a multitude of directions. A historically gestated

form of unequal, patriarchal relationship is attributed to natural, if not biological, causes.

In his text on conflict (Simmel, [1908] 2009), Simmel touches on jealousy, envy and spite as feelings derived from the conflicts in relationships between couples. From his point of view, jealousy arises when a third party prevents us from preserving an affective or symbolic value; while envy arises when attempts are made to achieve that value. The jealous person believes they have a legitimate claim to that value. The envious person wants to obtain it. Envy is projected onto the object, jealousy onto the possessor of value. For its part, spite is the envious desire for an object, not because it is desirable, but because another person possesses it.

Once again, being quite post-romantic, Simmel maintains the futility of claiming rights over feelings in the way of demanding their enforcement. This involves proceeding with inadequate means and, he declares, “it is as absurd as warning a bird that has flown away to go back to its cage.” The romantic standards that monitor fidelity and monogamy obviously lose their power when the urge and need for love disappears.

In connection with the issue of infidelity, Simmel also puts forward interesting reflections on adventure, another social form, regardless of its content (Frisby and Feethersone, 1997). From an experiential perspective, he defines adventure as a unit closed in on itself, unconnected to life, which contains meaning and need for those who experience it. By embarking on an adventure, he claims, we seize new sections of the world to assume within us. It is a crossroads of security and insecurity of life at the same time. And on the subject of love affairs, he notes, a brief love experience is therefore not an adventure. It must necessarily include success and drunkenness, an air of triumph, oaths of eternity; these are two souls that form a higher unit. And, he adds, tongue in cheek, adventure is

not typical of the projected life, or, I would add, of romantic love either. As is evident, once again, when talking about adventure, Simmel adopts an avant-garde position more typical of the 21st century. It is one of those ways, he says, that have a mysterious ability to make us feel our entire life for a moment. His individualistic stance is exacerbated for the sake of achieving a personal experience of great intensity, which is common in contemporary times.

### **Femininity, masculinity, and the relationship between the sexes**

One of the best-known, most controversial themes in Simmel's work is his conception of the relationship between the sexes. Throughout these dissertations, the author constantly falls into contradictions that reveal the morality of his time linked to a desire to place oneself on the side of women, which is rarely achieved. (Gaytán, 2007; Osborne, 1987)

In his text on the philosophy of love contained in *Snapshots sub specie seternitatis* (Simmel, [1901-1902] 2012), he declares that in love relationships, whoever loves less has more power, establishes their conditions and has an advantage over the other. Regarding this initial statement, he points out that it is usually the man who loves less, which makes him superior to the woman. However, he adds, this is not so unfair, because those who love more, in other words, women, enjoy a deeper happiness, which ends up enabling them to regain the upper hand.

He also addresses these issues in his work on conflict, He claims that women are physically weak and prey to the desire of men. For this reason, their form of defense is morality, because it is through its norms that the protection of the weak is created (morality limits, prohibits and equalizes). And he adds, "decent" women are severe towards other women who violate morality by failing to adjust to

that fundamental responsibility. They debate whether to include them or exclude them from the group, from “good society.” Men, on the other hand, are strong and aggressive.

In his work on feminine culture, Simmel further elaborates on these issues. In an overblown statement, he argues that objective culture is not asexual, but entirely male. Men have created art, industry, science, commerce, the state, and religion, which is why female productions are classified as insufficient. However, he adds, it is important to recognize that female existence has other bases and flows through other channels. Two vital types must therefore be built, not one that is superior and one that is inferior. However, as one advances through this text, this critical, feminist Simmel disappears when we come across statements such as the ones we present below: the historical destiny of women is man, the home, and children. They conceive of themselves as a means rather than an end, so their fate is sad.

This conservative, moralistic view of Simmel is broadened when he addresses the subject of sexuality as an experience that differs by gender. In his work on the masculine and feminine (Oakes, 1984), the author declares that sexuality for men consists in doing, and for women in being. This leads him to argue that sexuality for women is secondary because it is indifferent to them whether there are men in their lives. They have a sexuality that is self-sufficient, which he calls “centripetal sexuality,” which does not need the other; its essence is absolute and closed. This approach is totally in keeping with the prevailing ideas of his time regarding women as beings who do not desire, who do not need a sexual life because they exercise rational power over their impulses, which raises them to the category of chaste, good women.

In the case of men, his opinions are no better. For Simmel, male sexuality is only realized in the relationship with woman. And, he

adds, once men's desire has been satisfied, what ties him to the woman disappears, which is why the man "exits from" the love relationship. This approach completely justifies the double standard of romantic love. For men who fulfill their role as economic providers and who do not regard themselves as being forced to comply with the norm of fidelity, having sex with other women is common. In the case of women, adherence to the love relationship is not explained by the persistence of the loving feeling either but by the advent of pregnancy, the result of that sexuality. And this approach connects with another one, the woman's sexual impulse ends at an earlier age than it does for me, since she transfers her attention from the relationship with the man to the relationship with the child, which, in this logic, desexualizes her even more.

Another of his well-known ideas regarding the distinction between the sexes corresponds to the ways of creating culture, typical of women, which are the home and its influence on men. On the home, he adds, for women it means their life, for men only part of it: the home is the great achievement of women. And on household chores, for Simmel, women possess "secondary originality" since the former can be performed by anyone with "middling talent" since they are repetitive and lack creativity. Regarding the feminine influence on men, our author declares that it is they who shape the masculine soul, and he adds, the work of women is man in the sense that, even though they are incapable of creating objective culture, they provide encouragement for them to do so. Female roles are clear: women are homemakers, the caretakers of the home and encourage their husbands, a clear expression of the spirit of the time.

### *Coquetry*

One of the social forms most deeply explored by Simmel was coquetry, about which he wrote in various texts (Simmel, [1901-1902] 2012; Oakes, 1984). When talking about it, he defines it as a



feature of human relationships in modern society. Simmel argues that many human relationships find their exemplary, normative form in the relationship between the sexes. Coquetry is a form that does not reject any content. In multiple areas of life, the interval that opens during indecision to provide an answer is extremely common. In various fields, possibilities open for the individual such as beliefs, parties, and doctrines. Indecision in life is a positive behavior, it gives pleasure, “you flirt with things,” he says. This social form, he adds, imitates the psychological deviation that comes from wanting goods that are not within our reach but are only available through effort and sacrifice. Coquetry means an antithesis: to offer oneself or to grant oneself and to refuse simultaneously or successively, alternating possession and non-possession, yet making them be felt in a single act. The willingness and unwillingness to give oneself to the other are inextricably combined, which can be done in a subtle or exhibitionistic way. Coquetry, adds Simmel, is manifested in the body, in the look out of the corner of the eye, in the swaying of the hips, showing off the most attractive part of the body to stimulate sexual desire. This body is decorated, which draws even more attention to it by reinforcing it as something that is meaningful and loaded with value. Coquetry is understood as a game that consists of getting as close as possible to a definitive resolution, without embracing it and always leaving the question hanging in the air.

The protagonist in this game is the woman, says the author, because it is she who chooses and gives herself once the man has been chosen. The man, on the other hand, “looks for the woman in general as a female.” The power a woman possesses in this game does not last long, since it is exercised while answering yes or no; once the decision made, her power ends. In this respect, attempts are made to prolong the game of coquetry as long as possible by women. For men, this game produces enjoyment, a pleasant value.

For Simmel, coquetry is not an artifice of bad women, it is a game that does not morally debase any of its participants.

### **Final thoughts**

Georg Simmel is a 19<sup>th</sup>-century thinker who freely reflected on the social forms surrounding the feeling of love, creating a denatured perspective on them, which is unconventional yet in some respects, historical. Highlighting his ideas that oppose the concept of romantic love makes it possible to show his originality within the broad set of ideas typical of his time, which in many cases he shares, despite trying to be critical of them, an endeavor which he does not fully achieve when it comes to women, particularly as regards their sexuality. Likewise, his approaches to the social form of marriage as an institution that was originally unrelated to the feeling of love and which gradually made the latter its cause, expresses a high-profile sociological reflection that manages to link structural aspects with specific, subjective forms that were historically conceived. However, these explanations are in turn ambivalent when compared with his detailed analysis of marital relationships, in which moral evaluations and judgments abound.

At the same time, from the perspective provided by the post-romantic angle, we managed to discover in Simmel's thought the force with which he points out certain paradoxes within couples that still constitute dilemmas that should be debated in the 21st century. I am referring to the tragic nature of the contradiction between the feeling of love and the desire to fuse with the other; the loss of privacy following the birth of a child; the irrational desire to marry assuming an external and impersonal social form that prevents enrichment and to which individuals adhere; the call to surrender and total openness between the couple that leaves them disempowered and naked; the existential impoverishment caused by the routine of domestic space; the absurdity of the demand for

fidelity and monogamy of the other as norms to be fulfilled when the force that originated them has disappeared; the occurrence of conflict, jealousy, spite and hatred as inherent feelings in spouses; the disappearance of the delicious game of coquetry once the union has occurred; and the exclusion of adventure as an intense, satisfying experiential form that has no place in the social form of marriage.

On the other hand, and because of what has been studied by some authors about his life as a member of a couple, there are elements that allow us to glimpse that Simmel put into practice some post-romantic approaches. I mean the personal and intellectual respect that Simmel always showed for his wife Gertrud, whom he always supported to develop her personal life. This contributed to an intense intellectual dialogue and to share a happy and fulfilling life. In a letter to his friend Ignaz Jastrow, he wrote the following “before [the marriage], there was something banal, dark, chaotic, in which I could not find myself, at that time I was not living yet.” (Cited by Rammstedt, 2015, p. 187) Apparently, the type of marriage he talks about in his works was not his.

These are some of the avant-garde ideas of this thinker who is passionate about explaining the processes of individualization in various spheres of modern life, love being the one that concerned us here. I agree with Donald Levine’s view that “The originality and fruitfulness of Simmel’s thought lie in the courage and stubbornness— one should probably say ‘grace’ —with which he pursued his own ideas and insights, exploring the unknown (Levine, 2002: 15). I certainly regard Georg Simmel as a 19th century post-romantic.

## Bibliography

- Beck, U. and E. Beck-Gernsheim. (1990). *Das Ganz Normale Chaos der Liebe*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Coontz, E. (2006). *Marriage, a history. How love conquered marriage*, New York: Penguin books.
- Frisby, D. and M. Featherstone (eds). (1997). *Simmel on Culture*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Gaytán, A. (2007). “Dualidad y contaducción en Simmel: por una teoría sociológica del género”, in Sabido, Olga (Coord.) *Georg Simmel. Una revisión contemporánea*, México, DF: Anthropos/Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Azcapozalco, pp. 274-289.
- Giddens, A. (1992). *The transformation of intimacy. Sexuality, love and eroticism in modern societies*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Illouz, E. (1992). *Consuming the romantic utopia. Love and the cultural contradictions of capitalism*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Levine, D. N. (1971) (ed.). *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Levine, D. N. (2002). “Introducción” in Simmel, G. *Sobre la individualidad y las formas sociales. Escritos escogidos*, Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes Ediciones, pp. 11-70.
- Oakes, G. (1984) (ed.). *Georg Simmel: On Women, Sexuality, and Love*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Osborne, R. (1987). “Simmel y la ‘cultura femenina’ (Las múltiples lecturas de unos viejos textos)”, in *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas*, No. 40, pp. 97-111.
- Rammstedt, A. (2015). “Tres mujeres en diálogo con Simmel”, in Gilberto Díaz Aldana (ed.), *Una actitud del espíritu. Interpretaciones en torno a Georg Simmel*, Bogotá: Universidad

- Nacional de Colombia, Universidad de Antioquia, (Biblioteca abierta. Sociología), pp- 181-204.
- Rodríguez, Z. (2006). *Paradojas del amor romántico. Relaciones amorosas entre jóvenes*, México, DF: Secretaría de Educación Pública/Instituto Mexicano de la Juventud.
- Rodríguez, Z. (2019). “Imaginarios amorosos, reglas del sentimiento y emociones entre jóvenes en Guadalajara”, in *Estudios Sociológicos XXXVII*: 110, pp. 339-367.
- Sabido, O. y G. Zabludovsky (2016). “Estudio introductorio”, in Simmel, G. *Sociología. Estudios sobre las formas de socialización*, ePub r1.0, Editor digital Titivillus, digital edition, pp- 7-120.
- Sabido, O. (2015). “Fragmentos amorosos en el pensamiento de Georg Simmel,” in Díaz Aldana, Gilberto (Ed.) *Una actitud del espíritu. Interpretaciones en torno a Georg Simmel*, Bogotá: Universidad de Antioquia/Universidad Nacional de Colombia, pp. 205-236.
- Seebach, S. (2017). *Love and society. Special social forms and the master emotion*, London: Routledge.
- Simmel, G. [1901/1902] (2012). *Snapshots sub specie aeternitatis*, Thomas M. Kemple (trans.). (TCS 29 (3-4) (GSG 17).
- Simmel, G. [1908] (2009). *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms* (Vol. 1) Anthony J. Blasi, Anton K. Jacobs, Matthew Kanjiranthinkal (trans.). Leiden and Boston: Brill; (GSG 11).
- Simmel, G. [1917]. *Grundfragen der Sociologie. Individuum and Gesellschaft*, Berlin: Sammlung Göschen.
- Simmel, G. (1988). “On the sociology of family,” *Theory, culture & society*, London: SAGE, VI. 15 (3-4): pp. 283-293.
- Singer, I. (1984). *The nature of love, 2: courtly and romantic*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Stone, L. (1979). *The family, sex and marriage in England 1500-1800*, Middlesex: Penguin books Ltd.
- Vernik, E. (2007). “Introducción. Aguafuertes simmelianas,” in Simmel, Georg, *Imágenes momentáneas sub specie aeternitatis*, Barcelona: Gedisa editorial, pp- 9-24.
- Weber, M. [1922]. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der Umtehendn Soziologie*, Tubinga: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck)
- Zabludovsky, G. (2007). “Max Weber y Georg Simmel” in Sabido, Olga (Coord.) *Georg Simmel. Una revisión contemporánea*, México, DF: Anthropos/Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Azcapozalco, pp.143-160