



Swen Seebach, *Love and Society. Special Social Forms and the Master of Emotion*, New York: Routledge, 2017, 214 pages

Paulina Sabugal

Volume 21, numéro 2, 2017

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1043795ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1043795ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN

1616-2552 (imprimé)

2512-1022 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Sabugal, P. (2017). Compte rendu de [Swen Seebach, *Love and Society. Special Social Forms and the Master of Emotion*, New York: Routledge, 2017, 214 pages]. *Simmel Studies*, 21(2), 138–143. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1043795ar>

Copyright © Paulina Sabugal, 2017

Cet document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

point is to let the social emerge in transactions, grasp and isolate their “forms”.

One might wonder why we find the word “legacy” in the title. The second fundamental challenge of this volume consists in considering Simmel’s legacy “not so much in formulating answers to well-established sociological questions – as Pyyhtinen writes – as in transforming the whole landscape of sociological problems by offering altogether different abstractions”. Simmel always sustained that sociology had not to discover any new object of inquiry: the social science is a new perspective on the modern life of individuals as well as collective entities. This should be the task of sociology as the science inquiring on social *forms*, not simply a science of social facts: this is the challenge for contemporary social scientists who call themselves “relationists” and must proceed, looking at Simmel’s work, like dwarfs on a giant’s shoulders.

PAULINA SABUGAL

Swen Seebach, *Love and Society. Special Social Forms and the Master of Emotion*, New York: Routledge, 2017, 214 pages.

In “What’s love but a second hand emotion” sang Tina Turner in 1984 when she released the song *What’s love got to do with it?*, which later became her most successful single. In 2010, Thomas Scheff dedicated a book to the topic of love with the same title *What’s love got to do with it?*, in which he concluded that love as a multifaceted concept, is difficult to define.

In 2017, Swen Seebach, a Juan de la Cierva postdoctoral researcher looked for a definition of love from a sociological approach. In his book *Love and Society: Special Social Forms and the Master of Emotion*, published by Routledge, he purposes an intense dialogue with different authors in order to see what love is, what has been its social importance and how it actually has a fundamental

role in society as a second- order social form according to Georg Simmel sociology.

Seebach`s book is the result of a research project whereby he completed nearly 100 qualitative interviews with people from different European countries with various sexual orientations and backgrounds. His data collection provided a variety of discourses and definitions of what love is. The author decided to focus on romantic love because it is the only kind of love relationship that allows the ones involved to choose each other. His methodology is based on ethnographic observations in Barcelona, Berlin and Leipzig that were carried out mainly in streets, cafés, trains, metros, train stations, airports and shopping centers.

These realities set the stage for Seebach`s multilayered study of how “love” unfolds in many different ways and places, and how “it” could work as a social bond, a feeling, an emotion, a key to power and a second- order form in Simmel terms. Simmel discussed social and cultural phenomena in terms of ‘forms’. For Simmel, sociology should study the patterns and forms of the interactions between and among individuals, rather than social laws. The author decides to take Simmel form theory as a reference to define love: "The special nature of these second- order forms is expressed by the way in which they help to link first- order forms of sociation to the duration/ durability of society [...]" (p. 60). He begins with three different love stories to illustrate how love has changed over the course of history and how it has been used to construct and invent some other social categories such as *family*. The main characters of the stories, Julie, Victor and David, are situated in different historical periods (1655, 1894 and 2013) to show how love has changed. Even if the main critic about this introduction could be the lack of scientific value it has, the author believes this is the best way to highlight the fundamental role that love has had in social narratives and imaginaries. Those brief love stories are similar to all the other love stories we have seen in films, read in poetry books and heard in many different songs; all of them references that Simmel called "objective culture". Swen Seebach talks about a social phenomenon

that is universal and unique; everybody has had a love experience and everybody could be easily touched by a love story even if we have different ideas of what love is. Every person feels to have the right to say something about love. As a matter of fact, the author explains how he was severely criticized by the academic community by doing a research about love because it has been seen as an unserious topic (even if love has been studied from different approaches and disciplines such as philosophy, literature, archeology, anthropology and psychology) and how revealing the mystery of love could ruin his private life and the way he loves, just as Oscar Wilde's famous 1893 play *Salomé* claims: "the mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death".

Love and society begins by trying to answer to the question: What is love? Seebach takes the risk of trying to define love by discussing the work done by different sociologists that approached to the concept of love and loving. But, by defining it, the author is at the same time putting borders and dangerous limits on what love could be for the current society. The risk precisely rests on the fact that by engaging in this endeavour, some aspects could lead us inevitably to the exclusion. On the other hand, Swen Seebach stands firm and gives the reader a strong and a very good theoretical base while carrying out this arduous task. It explores mainly two sides of love: as an emotion and as a social bond. The discussion goes further by analyzing Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love, in which love could be understood as a form that at the same time creates various love forms. Finally, he brought into discussion Eva Illouz, who defines love as an emotion with a utopian dimension but misses its social dimension; Luhman's theorization of love and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's work.

The next part of the book discusses the work of four important authors from the field of the sociology of emotions: Thomas Scheff, Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, Natàlia Cantó Milà and especially Georg Simmel. Theoretical speaking, and in accordance to Simmel's formal sociology, Seebach defines love as a "second- order form" which is helpful when talking about love durability, creating a love memory

and dealing with love as a feeling or an emotion. Seebach adds to his love definition a sophisticated line-up of other social theorists, including Richard Sennet and his work about public space and transformation of the cities.

Faithfulness and gratefulness are both concepts that appeared in many parts of the book. As reviewed in the first part, the author questioned if both notions are a part of love or if love is part of them, or if they are part of a love performance. Faithfulness and mostly gratefulness are second- order forms that are the memory of society. For Georg Simmel, accepting love as a second- order social form was a long way of reflection; but by taking a look at rituals and romantic love myths it is possible to understand how and why love is in indeed a second- order form as Seebach affirms.

When talking about love rituals, the author insists that it was easier to find love before, because there were social rituals and events specially designed for trying to find *that* someone. But technology nowadays has changed the social rules and dynamics in which love can happen. Having a Facebook account or downloading an app onto one's phone can be a means not only to have a sexual relationship but also a way in which a person could claim to find real love. What would Simmel say about love now?

As an example of this, there are thousands of migrants (most of them women) that leave their country of origin to follow someone because they just fell in love with a man they met by internet or as Airbnb host. They are not only chasing a person but a dream and an idea of love. This could create a dangerous and heteronormative discourse in which everything could be justified in the name of love. Gratefulness, faithfulness and authenticity, in this context, are questioned. The cultural identity, the social subjects and how this phenomenon interacts with the power asymmetry enter into the debate. This has been discussed in detail in other books such as *A Courtship after Marriage: Sexuality and Love in Mexican Transnational Families* written by Jennifer Hirsch and published by the Berkeley University of California Press in 2003 and in another more recent publication *Controcanto. Donne latinoamericane tra violenza e riconoscimento*

by Angela Toffanin in 2015. Both of them are books that discuss how love can be a strong motivation for migration.

In the third and last part of the book, Seebach explores the rules and moral order established by love throughout history. Just after the Second World War, a new kind of modernity was born. Love became an urgent and necessarily social bond not only reserved for a specific social sector (the bourgeois class). At the same time, morality limits were reinforced to regulate and organize actions and interactions within love relationships, both individually and with the rest of whole society. Seebach makes a review on how this morality is applied and uses intimacy as a principle that creates social organization and regulation. We should remember that for a long time, the only definition that we had for love was a religious one.

At the heart of Seebach's narrative are the voices from the interviews he carried out for a three-year period. By using sociological and anthropological tools and by comparing ideas and imagery from what Simmel called objective culture (e.g. songs, films and series), Seebach demonstrates how love is a second-order form and how the small rituals and myths of couples in their daily lives support it. There is a cultural production of love and a couple's production of love (rituals of intimacy that create and recreate an intimate bond).

The book concludes with a reflection that could easily give birth to another love book. Seebach takes a final risk and questions the idea of capitalist and neoliberalism love in which having a relationship depends on economy and politics. As Marx and Engels affirmed in 1894: "family is a central institution to the development of capitalism". Love and capitalism from a historical point of view seem interconnected. The idea of satisfying love is about the market and consumption. As a consequence, this leads us to reflect that love is not for everybody but for the ones who can afford it. Getting married and having a baby are love performances under which capitalism can still be reproduced. Love can only have a perspective of future just through the lens of capitalism. Love creates bonds and so does capitalism.

When talking about politics, the morality of love is dangerous because it creates a social organization under the disguise of protecting the ones we love. This might sound logical but we should ask as well: protecting from whom? migrants? homosexuals? Under the umbrella of love, politics can react and attack easily “the otherness” and media can develop hate speech against the ones that are considered the enemies. If love exists and works as a social bond, hate does as well.

Media, markets and politics are changing love... or maybe love is changing them. The future of this second- order form is in continuous transformation and it is always creating new ways of existing. If it is going to be obsolete in the future or even more powerful is, as Seebach says, an open question. In any case, it is a fact that new ways of love and loving are giving birth and, at the same, new, different and complex social bonds are created.