



Simmel and Marx: Complementary Relational Approaches to Romantic Love. A Feminist Revisitation

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Article abstract

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1. Introduction

The main purpose of this article is to re-examine the legacy of Marx and Simmel for the study of romantic love from a feminist perspective. In this respect, I assume that all intellectual exercise is situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988). That is, I will be revisiting two classic European authors, not with the aim of uncritically paying tribute to them, but to highlight the heuristic elements of their work that will enable me to interpret and question my own context. I am interested in the relational legacy these two authors provide for the

study of the affective sphere. Specifically, I am interested in highlighting how both offer analytical inputs to consider the relationships between love, power, and conflict. I identify my own approach with feminist positions that have expressed their concern over the depoliticization of the affective sphere (Pedwell and Whithead, 2012) and the reduction to its individual dimension. Illouz pointed out that the retreat to individuality and interiority is part of an “economic and capitalist subjectivity” (Illouz, 2019: 5), therefore, a relational approach is relevant and crucial. Otherwise, we are also at risk of analyze emotions and affections from a *homo economicus* perspective. Behind this concern, I attempt to answer the following questions: What do Marx and Simmel posit when they talk about love? In what respects do they agree and differ? And lastly, what is the complementary contribution of their proposals considering recent studies on love from a feminist perspective?

To achieve the above, I made the methodological decision to interpret them in the light of analytical problems, to highlight their convergences and divergences. In other words, I do not posit the scope of each author as a monograph, nor will I do a chronological or biographical follow-up of their works, but I will gradually reassess them through questions that guide the relevance of their legacy. Accordingly, I divided the work into four sections. In the first, I highlight the notion of romantic love underlying their work. In the second, I propose the relational approach of both perspectives as well as their convergences and divergences. Following Vandenberghe’s classification (2018: 37), I propose that Marx offers a “structural-relational” and Simmel a “relational-processual” approach for the feminist analysis to the affective sphere. In the third, I delve into the reflections of Simmel and Marx that make it possible to formulate love ties, power, and conflict. In the fourth, I highlight the keys to a feminist interpretation that highlights gender asymmetries, the criticism of compulsory heterosexuality and

violence, characteristic of romantic love in contemporary capitalism. Lastly, I expose my conclusions. I believe that from this analytical and political perspective, the Marxist-Simmelian legacy provides a thought-provoking program for the relational analysis of affects in general and love.

2. Romantic Love through Marx and Simmel

Since the 1990s, several works on love and intimacy (Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 1997; Luhmann, 1998) have shaped what is known as a new interdisciplinary field: “studies on love” (Jónasdóttir, 2014). In this field, various themes have been highlighted; one of these is related to the criticism of romantic love as an emotional device of capitalism (Ferguson, 2018; Illouz, 1997; 2012; 2019). In *Love in the Western World* (1983), Denis Rougemont indicates the emergence of romantic love in the Middle Ages. So, when Marx and Simmel talk about love within a couple, they envisage the romantic love consolidated in the 19th century in the West. As Illouz (1997) has pointed out, this type of love is one of the cornerstones of capitalist culture. It involves heterosexual love (Jónasdóttir, 1993; Illouz, 2012) and is based on two topics that will be crucial in capitalist ideology (García Andrade and Sabido Ramos, 2018: 138-143). First, the autonomy of the individual vis-à-vis the group, and therefore the ability to choose a partner beyond the family or group to which one belongs. At the same time, love intensifies personal relations and individualization (Luhmann, 1998). And second, the distinction between the feeling of love and economic interest (Illouz, 1997).¹ In other words, the ideal of romantic love is that people are chosen

¹ Related to this idea, with Adriana García Andrade, we developed what we called “the semantics of romantic love.” (García Andrade and Sabido Ramos, 2018: 138-143).

out of love rather than interest, necessity or because of an economic calculation.

Ahmed points out that another of the ideals of romantic love is that: “The couple should be ‘a good match’ (a judgment that often exercises conventional class and racial assumptions about the importance of ‘matching’ the backgrounds of partners)” (Ahmed: 2014: 149). Also, the couple “should exclude others from the realm of sexual intimacy (an idealization of monogamy that often equates intimacy with property rights or rights to the intimate other as property)” (Ahmed, 2014: 149). Therefore, romantic love perpetuates male dominance and heteronormativity (Ferguson, 2018: 36). That is why another of the characteristics of romantic love is its patriarchal nature, since it assumes an asymmetry between men and women to the detriment of the latter in various areas, including but not restricted to the sexual sphere. Under this conception, women are the source of men’s pleasure (Herrera, 2020: 35), but the free exercise of women’s sexuality will always be judged and disparaged. What do Simmel and Marx offer in the interdisciplinary field of “studies on love” (Jónasdóttir, 2014)?

In first instance, it is necessary to point out that both Marx and Simmel explain how social order implies something beyond a purely utilitarian reason based on calculation. Constantly Marx questions the idea of reducing the human being to a *homo economicus*, “they are Robinsonades” used to say. According to Marx, starting from an isolated individual is a big mistake like Robinson Crusoe. In *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* ([1859] 1998), Marx writes: “The subject of our discussion is first of all material production by individuals as determined by society, naturally constitutes the starting point” (Marx, 1998: 1). For its part, in *Philosophy of Money* ([1900] 2004), Simmel points out that the human being is an “exchanging animal” (Simmel, 2004: 291). For Simmel, the human being is a being with others, with whom he not only

exchanges money and merchandise but also music, letters, affects, and love. For Marx, the human being is a being with others also, with whom he produces not only commodities and merchandise but also his own social life. Although they start from different intellectual traditions, both authors provide a relational ontology. For both, the human being is a *being with others*. That principle is perceived when both approach the subject of love.

Marx was not interested in reflecting on love as a couple, which is scarcely mentioned in his work.² However, when Marx distinguishes love in ancient times from modern love, he points out that the latter is love of one's partner (wife) or children. In an excerpt from *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* ([1841] 2017), Marx states that: "We are told that the desire of a being is the oldest love; of course, the most abstract and, therefore, the oldest of loves is love of oneself, love of the particular being of each person" (Marx, 2017: 143). On the other hand, modern love makes us believe in love of another person, such as "love of one's wife or children" (Marx, 2017: 143). For Marx love is a tie that binds one to them, even if they are not present. It is interesting that in this fragment, Marx associates love with marriage and even children. Indeed, romantic love legitimizes the bond through an institution such as marriage and its reproductive function. Hence the heteronorm mandate that historically shaped it, an issue which Marx ignores.

An analytical input for the study of love is found in Marx's conception of the sensitive realm. For Marx, society is present in the individual, in other words, in both his body and his sensitive experience. As Turner points out, for Marx the existence is undoubtedly sensorial, and he treat the body "via a theory of human sensuous practice" (Turner, 2008: 208). In other words, for Marx,

² At the biographical (even epistolary) level, see Mary Gabriel, 2011.

human existence is anchored in the body and sensitivity, which is always historical. In this respect, the sensitive sphere and therefore love, is also historical, as shown in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* ([1932] 2014):

For not only the five senses but also the so-called mental senses – the practical senses (will, love, etc.) – in a word, *human* sense – the humanness of the senses – comes to be by virtue of its object, by virtue of *humanized* nature. The *forming* of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present. (Marx, 2014: 140).

In *The German Ideology* ([1846] 1988), both Marx and Engels reassess the iconic example of the “cherry tree” to support the historical conception of sensitivity. Marx and Engels point out that there is no innate “sensuous certainty”, since what we perceive and our perceptible capacity depend on history and the accumulated work of generations: “The cherry-tree, like almost all fruit-trees, was, as is well known, only a few centuries ago transplanted by commerce into our zone, and therefore only by this action of a definite society in a definite age has it become ‘sensuous certainty’” (Marx and Engels, 1998: 45). What we feel through the senses assumes socio-historical coordinates, not only because of the historicity of the person who feels but also because of the historicity of what is felt. Related with this passage, Ahmed asserts: “Marxism provides a philosophy for rethinking the object as not only in history, but as an effect of history” (Ahmed, 2006: 40). This is a powerful idea for thinking about how perception, feelings and

senses imply social relations in contact with the world.³ Historicity is as much about whoever perceives as about everything that is produced concerning being perceived.

In a newspaper article Marx wrote for *Rheinische Zeitung* he criticized “The Divorce Bill” ([1842] 1982). In this text, he defends marriage as a social institution and calls for its secularization in opposition to the conservatism of his time. Regarding the dissolution of marriage, he regards the interference of the clergy, but also of the state as inadmissible. Marx questions the “hedonistic point of view” that seeks to dissolve marriage, only because of an “arbitrary whim” or a “mere individual desire” (Marx, 1982: 289) and resorts to the state to undertake this dissolution. From a perspective that would seem questionable to us today, Marx criticizes the desire of couples to put a legal end to an unsatisfactory union merely because of capricious “aversions.” Marx questions the interference not only of church and state, but also of a “radical individualism” (González, 1980). This is because for Marx, behind the idea of individualism lies the liberal law in defense of property.⁴ As Illouz reminds us, in *On the Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* [1884], Engels criticizes the bourgeois family for subjugating women and preserving private property based on the laws of inheritance. “For Engels, monogamous bourgeois “affectionate” marriage is an hypocritical illusion” (Illouz, 1997: 7). In contrast, Engels argues that a new generation of independent proletarian

³ Love would be intrinsically associated with this possibility, as noted by Jónasdóttir, for whom love is a “practical human-sensuous activity” (Jónasdóttir, 2011: 257; Jónasdóttir, 2018: 19).

⁴ In *On the Jewish Question* ([1844] 1978), Marx refines this criticism. Since for liberal law, freedom is based more on its isolation, and its only right is the right to private property.

women were becoming protagonists of an egalitarian sex-love relationship (Bowring, 2019: 163).⁵

But although Marx and Engels did not follow radical Utopian projects around love, Illouz also draws attention to how, for the political Utopia of Marx and Engels, authentic love would mean the separation of economic interests from the love bond. In *The Communist Manifesto* ([1848] 2011), they point out that: “The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation” (Marx and Engels, 2011: 67). Only in a communist society will love and marriage be free from domination and economic gains no longer be a reason to form a couple (Illouz, 1997: 8). Also, in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* ([1932] 2014), Marx goes on to point out that, “The transcendence of private property is therefore the emancipation of all human senses and attributes” (2014: 138) including love. As we can see, Marxism provides an analytical frame to study love related with socio-structural conditions (state, church, private property, and laws) and asymmetries between people based on social class.

Unlike Marx, Simmel paid particular attention to love (Sabido Ramos, 2015), a topic that remained important in his later writings on *Lebensphilosophie* (Lichtblau, 1989: 92). Like Lichtblau asserts, in Simmel’s cultural milieu: “the phenomenon of sexual love appeared as a crucial symbol that reflected the cultural distinctiveness of modernity” (Lichtblau, 1989: 90). In the essay “On Love (A Fragment)” ([1913] 1984a) Simmel referred to love as a feeling that can be realized in numerous ways, such as love of one’s partner,

⁵ According to Bowring, Engels was inspired by her own experience of the Irish millworker Mary Burns, his own lover (2019: 163).

children, country, God, ideal or filial love. However, according to David Frisby, the sociological orientation towards the “phenomenon of love” (Frisby, 1998: 280) in a couple, is related to the short essay entitled “On the sociology of the family” ([1895] 1998). Simmel briefly reviews the different historical forms the family has adopted and its cultural variations. The presence of love in marriage is not ahistorical (Simmel, 1998: 287). Simmel highlights the fact that in modern times, “individual love” is part of the expectations of modern marriage is something that was not necessarily decisive in other historical forms of marriage. It was through certain social conditions that “specific feelings of lifetime love and fidelity began to emerge” (Simmel, 1998: 290). From these early works to *The View of Life* ([1918] 2010a), love was for Simmel a subject of both sociological and philosophical interest.

For Simmel, love as a cultural and symbolic form change according to the era. In *Eros, Platonic and Modern* ([1916] 1971) Simmel develops a semantics of love which is typical in the West, to distinguish between Ancient and Modern love (Christias, 2019: 186), or what we now call romantic love. In Greek thought, specifically in Platonic philosophy, there was a metaphysics of love that associated love with the world of ideas and notions such as beauty. If the beauty of a person and their soul led us to love, it was because they evoked the idea of general beauty from the world of ideas. On the other hand, the object of love was not a woman but a young man. In contrast, the modern conception envisages love “between persons” (Simmel, 1971: 241) rather than abstract ideas. For Simmel, the change of meaning between love in ancient times and modern love lies in the exclusivity of that feeling towards an individual whom we regard as unique and irreplaceable.

As a cultural form, modern love constitutes a world of meaning with its own end. In the posthumous *The View of Life* ([1918] 2010a), Simmel writes: “But love, as love, has the characteristic that it is a pure, self-enclosed internal occurrence in the soul, though it is of

course woven around the now utterly irreplaceable image of the other individual” (Simmel, 2010a: 32). According to Frisby, for Simmel, love is a “third entity” and in that respect, love is “more-than-life” (1998: 280). This idea is taken up in the following aphorism formulated by Simmel: “In erotic nature, love is its own end – it cares neither about reproduction nor about satisfaction” (Swedberg and Reich, 2010: 42). It is interesting to note that for Simmel, love is not only not associated with collective interests, but is also unrelated to the interests of biological reproduction. Donald Levine points out that the principle of individuality is expressed in much of Simmelian work, so it is no coincidence that Simmel attempts to find the ideal of individuality in the modern idea of love (Levine, 1971: XLII). Nor is it a coincidence that Simmel refers to the fact that an “individual-law” can arise in a couple (1971), understood as the norms that arise within it and do not depend on abstract entities outside the will of those comprising a couple.

This emotional expectation is related to the historical process of individuation that assumes individual choice as regards couples and friends, based on elective tastes and affinities and beyond collective mandates (Simmel, 2009: 578). Modern love is not associated with group interests but is based on the individual’s choice; it is not necessarily linked to reproductive purposes. For example, flirtation is a form of love play (Simmel, 1984b: 145). According to Simmel, “Flirtation” ([1911] 1984b) is the product of a special kind of cultural refinement that moves away from physical satisfaction and gives another meaning to bodily contact, away from genitality. Simmel raises the *performance* of flirtation and the gestural expectations associated with gendered bodies. Simmel identifies the diversity of products associated with flirtation, such as clothing, perfumes, ornaments. In this argument we can appreciate a potential sociology of the body. Together with “Excursus on Jewelry and Adornment” ([1908] 2009) and “The Philosophy of

Fashion” ([1904]1997a), we find a suggestive way to analyze all the artifacts’ meanings associated with flirtation in today’s consumer society.

However, according to Simmel, the affective expectation in modernity separates it from economic interests. Like Marx, for Simmel, the love bond operates on a circuit other than economic interest. In “The Role of Money in the Relations between the Sexes” ([1898] 2010b) Simmel points out that in modernity, there is a separation between love relationships and money since they are two spheres of immeasurable value. In *Philosophy of Money* ([1900] 2004), he also questions the equation between money and love: “Money is never an adequate mediator of personal relationships – such as the genuine love relationship, however abruptly it may be broken off – that are intended to be permanent and based on the sincerity of the binding forces” (Simmel, 2004: 378). In other words, the modern expectation of romantic love assumes a choice based on affection rather than on financial interest or need. That is the reason why for Simmel in “Some Remarks on Prostitution in the Present and in Future” ([1891/1892] 1997b) asserts that the economic transaction typical of prostitution is something contrary to love and devalues people.

In short, Simmel shows how the conception of love varies throughout history and in that respect, there is a constant possibility of change. This idea is important in that it highlights one of the author’s visionary points of view regarding the historical forms of expression of love. Although Simmel does not posit a political project as a way out of the tragedy of modernity, in “Fragments of a philosophy of love” ([1901/1902] 2007) he points out that in modern culture, the ephemeral is being established as a form of people’s experience. This condition implies a redefinition of forms of marriage: “and even new forms of couples, which no-one today can suspect, much less prophesy” (Simmel, 2007: 119). As we can see, Simmel’s approach provides an analytical frame to study love

related with cultural forms and shared meanings that change historically.

3. From Romantic Love to Loving Bond: Two Relational Sociologies

The notions of love in Marx and Simmel are limited to the romantic love consolidated in their era. What then is the significant contribution their works should make? A first aspect to consider is that both Marx and Simmel have been portrayed as the forerunners of relational sociology (Cantò-Milà, 2005; Emirbayer, 1997: 288; Vandenberghe, 2018). The latter has been understood as a way of grouping certain analytical horizons concerned with transcending substantialities and fixed states (Emirbayer, 1997), as well as giving rise to relational processes and approaches (Vandenberghe, 2018: 38). This is the perspective that interests me, as it makes it possible to consider affections in general, and the love bond, from a relational perspective.⁶

As has already been pointed out by Emirbayer in a theoretical text that contains a grand Marxist gesture in the title “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology” (1997): “Marx, for instance [...] was a profoundly relational thinker” (1997: 290). Likewise, Vandenberghe notes that: “Marx is obviously an important source for any theorist who wants to dissolve entities and substances into relations and processes” (2018: 40). In the same vein, but in the case of Simmel, Pyhtinen notes that: “The kind of relational and processual emphases that are central to contemporary thought – and that are

⁶ With Adriana García Andrade, we also worked with authors such as Norbert Elias (Sabido Ramos and García Andrade, 2015).

often thought of as much more recent developments – are already present in Simmel’s work” (2010: 4). For her part, Cantó-Milà has underlined the fact that Simmel bases his relational sociology on the *Wechselwirkung* principle: “This relational perspective is one of the greatest contributions to sociology and constitutes his trademark” (2005: 59). Below I will highlight what they consist of and how their relational perspectives differ and how they can contribute to thinking about the love bond.

In the case of Marx’s relational approach, it is striking that both Emirbayer and Vandenberghe cite two instances in *Capital, volume 1* ([1867] 1954), in which this relational imprint stands out. Emirbayer points out: “He further observes that “capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons which is mediated through things” (Emirbayer, 1997: 288). Vandenberghe takes up a quote from “Fetishism of commodities and its secret” in which Marx noted: “a determinate relation appears in the phantasmagoric form of a relation between things” (Vandenberghe, 2018: 41). In my case, I examine a quote from *Grundrisse, Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* ([1857/1858] 1973), in which Marx points out that money has an underlying social relationship:

“The reciprocal and all-sided dependence of individuals who are indifferent to one another forms their social connection. [...] On the other side, the power which each individual exercises over the activity of others or over social wealth exists in him as the owner of *exchange values*, of *money*. The individual carries his social power, as well as his bond with society, in his pocket” (Marx, 1973: 87).

It is relationships and not things that are at the base of social activity. It is the power relations between capital/labor that make value possible. In other words, value is not intrinsic to objects; it is only possible within the framework of social relations and asymmetries. In *Capital, volume 1* ([1867] 1954), he ironically noted:

“So far, no chemist has ever discovered exchange value either in a pearl or a diamond.” (Marx, 1954: 87). Within the framework of this relational thinking, it is hardly surprising that in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* ([1932] 2014), Marx refers to reciprocity to speak of a loving bond: “If you love without evoking love in return – that is, if your loving as loving does not produce reciprocal love; if through a *living expression* of yourself as a loving person you do not make yourself a *loved person*, then your love is impotent – a misfortune” (Marx, 2014: 181). This relational perspective shows a powerful legacy for thinking about the form of love as reciprocal effects between people.

Conversely, Simmel’s relational legacy to explain the love bond is related to his way of understanding emotions. In *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms* ([1908] 2009) he points out that ‘forms of socialization’ (*Vergesellschaftungsformen*) may be of several types, depending on their link, intensity, and duration, but the affective dimension is always present. In this respect, with Simmel, it is possible to think of the ‘exchanges of affects’ as a constitutive aspect of social forms. What is significant about his approach is that he does not think of emotion as something that can be explained from the individual, but as the ways we connect with others. Hence the relevance of “Excursus on Fidelity and Gratitude,” in which he posits emotions as a “form of a second order” (Simmel, 2009: 517). For Simmel, emotions contribute to the recollection or memory of relationships we experienced in the past (Cantó-Milà, 2012: 13), yet which left an affective imprint that can be either positive or negative.

From this perspective, with and beyond Simmel, Seebach recovers Simmel’s analytical perspective to conceive of love as a social bond (2017: 69). In his sociological observation about love, Simmel indicates how we must pay attention to the relationships and mutual influences love can generate which also transcend a

couple. For this reason, from his sociological perspective, Simmel does not treat the phenomenon from the perspective of emotion or feeling, but as a social bond. This is how he justifies it: “Other feelings, as much as they may bind people together, are still somewhat more solipsistic. Even love, friendship, patriotism, and a sense of social duty have of course their nature first in an affect that occurs within the subject itself” (Simmel, 2009: 521). A love relationship links not only the couple but also friends, colleagues, and family. So, for Simmel, if sociology wants to study love, it will be necessary to pay attention to the links it creates. In short, Simmel shifts from the feeling of love to the relationship between lovers (Sabido Ramos, 2015: 215). According to Simmel, lovers “have” a relationship (*Verhältnis*) (Simmel, 2009: 561). This is an example of how Simmel: “rejects individualistic and substantialist perspectives and focuses on relations. In his view, the social cannot be grasped based on atom like individuals or a society that would contain the individuals [...] The individual is thus not an absolute, final element, but an ‘assembled being’” (Pyyhtinen, 2010: 39). For the same reason, affections, particularly love, can be seen from a relational perspective.

According to Vandenberghe, inside the *relational turn*, there is no unified relational sociological theory “but a diffuse cluster of theories with selective affinities,” and we can distinguish two poles: “a structural-relational and a processual-interactionist one” (Vandenberghe, 2018: 37). Following Vandenberghe’s classification we can say that Marx’s relational legacy yields an inheritance that points out more towards the structural-relational level for the study of ties and their affective dimension. In other words, it not only considers the fact that sensitivity, emotions, and affections are embedded in specific relationships between human beings and the world, but also the way they involve the history of generations as well as asymmetries and inequalities between people. In the same way, Marx allows us to incorporate the socio-structural and

historical level – specifically the *material* dimension – to think about the world of affects.

Simmel's relational legacy provides an inheritance that points out more towards the relational-processual level. Meaning that it provides an analytical perspective to show how social forms have affects as a constitutive dimension. However, there are cultural codes that transform them historically. This does not exclude the participation of people in relation to these processes or their interactions in the performativity of affects and emotions. Simmel allows us to contend that our affective and bodily condition is not substantial but rather relational insofar as we are *always with others*. Affects and emotions therefore have enormous sociological relevance because they are not only a social product, but also ways of relating to others. In summary, Simmel allows us to incorporate the social process and symbolic exchange – specifically the *cultural* dimension – to think about the affective dimension of social ties, particularly love bond.

4. Loving Bond, Conflict, Death

The contributions of these authors in relational terms are valuable because they enable us to think about the love bond embedded in a network of relationships that transcend the strictly “intimate” sphere. What specific dimensions do they shed light on for the analysis of the love bond? In the case of Simmel, it is important to note how he argues that the love bond is not a space free of conflict. In couple relationships, conflict is present together with deep emotional tensions and mixed feelings: “Erotic relationships offer the most frequent example. As they often appear to us woven out of love and respect, or also contempt” (Simmel, 2009: 234). With this reasoning, Simmel demystifies the idea that harmony prevails in intimate relationships. Conflict is present in

relationships with one's partner, family, and friends. Simmel even point out that: "People who have much in common often treat one another with greater wickedness and injustice than complete strangers" (2009: 250). In that respect, for the author, "As discord among intimate people can thus have even more tragic consequences" (Simmel, 2009: 252).

In the case of the couple, jealousy plays a decisive role. For Simmel, jealousy is of "great sociological importance" in that it is a set of feelings present in the affective proximity that can arise in a couple relationship or within a group and have an impact on the structure of relationships. In the case of the couple, jealousy has to do with a sense of possession (Simmel, 2009: 256). Jealousy reveals the affective forms based on unity that can destroy not only people but the bond itself:

While jealousy can tie the most passionate hatred to the ongoing continuation of the most passionate love and the annihilation of both parties to the effect of the most heartfelt solidarity because the jealous destroy the relationship in as much as they are provoked to the destruction of the other – jealousy is perhaps that social phenomenon in which the construction of antagonism by way of unity achieves its subjectively most radical form (Simmel, 2009: 258)

The annihilation of the other or the self, based on emotions as forms of relationship and not as states of an isolated subject, can be seen in a short text published by Marx in 1846. The essay-translation, entitled "Peuchet: on suicide," was published in a German political journal *Gesellschaftsspiegel* at the behest of Engels. It is a translation commented on by Marx of a judicial report drafted by Jacques Peuchet, a chief archivist in the police who kept meticulous records of suicides in Paris. What is striking about this report is that "It is the first and last time the issue of gender oppression and the tyranny of *pater* and *mater* in the bourgeois family will be addressed" (González, 2012: 35). In the "Suicide Chart," the

main reasons for suicide were, first, illness, depression, and weakness of spirit (128 cases). These were followed by love passions, fights, and domestic squabbles (71 cases) (Marx, 2012: 96).

Apropos of this second motive, Marx examines various stories, including one about the daughter of a tailor who is engaged to be married to a butcher and celebrates their engagement at the groom's home. Since the bride's parents are unable to accompany her because they receive a last-minute order, the daughter attends the meeting alone. She spends the night at the groom's parents' house and when she returns home the next day, her parents berate her for the immorality of this act. Shame drove the girl to commit suicide because her own parents questioned her reputation: "The feeling of shame caused by this abject scene led the girl to the decision to end her own life" (Marx, 2012: 71). As Simmel pointed out years later in "Psychology of shame" ([1901] 2018), in a differentiated society, the experience of shame does not encompass all areas of life. However, there are situations in which the degrading or embarrassing situation "affects the integrality of the person, not just a localized interest" (Simmel, 2018: 70). In the 19th century, gender mandates associated with women's sexual reputation could have this self-annihilating effect if the doubt or suspicion of sexual exercise involved the "honesty" of a young woman.

Another story Marx analyzes concerns jealousy. It is about a young wife who jumped into the river Seine because of her husband's jealousy. The young couple had fallen prey to a disease that attacked the husband's body, making it misshapen. As a result of this situation, the husband became increasingly jealous of any kind of male companionship of his partner, including that of his own brother. The requirement of monogamy and exclusivity typical of romantic love became a hell for the girl:

The unfortunate woman was condemned to the most intolerable slavery and the only basis of the slavery practiced by Mr. M. [...] was the right to property, endorsed by a social situation that makes love independent of lovers' spontaneous feelings and entitles the jealous husband to keep his wife close to him, as the miser does his pouch, as if she were part of his inventory (Marx, 2012: 76).

Like Simmel, for Marx, jealousy is an expression of a sense of possession, specifically of property.⁷ The woman was the victim of romantic love that ideologically conceives of the beloved man or woman as though they were an object or a thing: "The jealous man is, above all else, a private owner" (Marx, 2012: 81). For Marx, only overcoming the private sector will allow a complete appropriation of the world through the senses including love (Marx, 1968: 118). According to Marx, the jealous husband believes he can keep his wife in his pocket, like his money. However, a network of relationships is woven into the love bond. For this reason, it is no coincidence that one of the strategies of a jealous person is to prevent their partner's relationships with those close to them like friends even family (Sabido Ramos and García Andrade, 2018: 150).

A complementary perspective of the analysis of jealousy in terms of the norms of monogamy and sexual exclusivity is provided by Simmel in "The Relative and the Absolute in the Problem of the Sexes" ([1911] 1984c). There he correctly points out that the rules we apply to people are not neutral, but instead are derived from the social asymmetry between the sexes and the position of power

⁷ Sempruch indicates the role of the critique to romantic love in early twentieth-century feminist Marxism. For example, Alexandra Kollontai's premise about "red love" is grounded on "the conviction that social equality and love for the community cannot be achieved without eradicating the property-related oppression of female sexuality and love (Sempruch, 2018: 118).

occupied by men (Simmel, 1984c: 103). It is therefore no coincidence that “what women may perceive as male, contingent and relative, men assume to be natural, eternal and absolute” (Vromen, 1990: 327). In other words, Simmel described how “objective culture,” namely art, science, religion, politics, laws, and norms are masculinized. In *Female Culture* [1911] (1984d) he writes: “In this context, it is important at the outset to affirm the fact that human culture, even as regards its purely objective contents, is not asexual [...] It is rather the case that, with the exception of a very few areas, our objective culture is thoroughly male.” (Simmel, 1984d: 67).⁸

The power of the *pater familias* is not just coercive power but rather “appears as authority” (Simmel, 1984c: 104). Simmel was interested in explaining what this male domination caused in terms of female consciousness (Vromen, 1990). As Vromen has pointed out about Simmel’s reflection: “Women, he argued, find themselves in a double-bind: not only are they judged by absolute standards, but they are also expected to abide by standards that apply to them only but that have been defined by men and for the advantage of men” (1990: 327). Based on this reasoning, we state that the norms and rules of sexual monogamy and exclusivity are more strictly applied to women. This requires not only external pressure but also self-convincing on the part of women. Unfortunately, much of the scope of Simmelian sociology of the sexes is limited by the biases of his time, despite his commitment to the liberal feminist movement (Oakes, 1984; Lichtblau, 1989; Vromen, 1990; Rammstedt, 2013), particularly as regards the essentialization of the

⁸ Guy Oakes (1984) has made a valuable contribution by clarifying the relation between objective culture and masculinity.

female condition. Nevertheless, some of his reasoning has significant heuristic value. In more detail than Marx, Simmel considers asymmetries based on gender and not just on social class.

5. Simmel and Marx from a Feminist Reassessment

The relationship between love, gender/class/race, domination, conflict, and capitalism has constituted a substantive part of feminist agendas, both in the past and recently (Jónasdóttir, 2018; Ferguson, 2018; Sempruch, 2018; García Andrade, Gunnarsson and Jónasdóttir, 2018). A contemporary reassessment of Simmel and Marx should not ignore the complaints or remarks about their blind spots. However, based on their relational legacies, it is possible to highlight certain pending issues that could certainly be solved with a feminist interpretation.⁹ I will highlight three minimal themes currently being revisited on feminist agendas for the analysis of love bonds: gender asymmetries and care, the criticism of compulsory heterosexuality, and violence.

Marx's structural-relational legacy has permitted its reception by feminism that allows the study of love from macro-meso dimensions (Jónasddóttir, 2011: 252). This is the case of Jónasddóttir, who has reexamined Marx's legacy for the study of love, considering that what lies at the basis of the "production of life" is love and the ability of human beings to create each other through *care* (Jónasddóttir, 1993). This is also what makes love alienable (Ferguson, 2018: 40) and exploitable (Jónasddóttir, 2014: 44; Jónasddóttir, 2018). According to Jónasddóttir, there is an exploitative relationship: "in which men tend to exploit women's

⁹ Regarding the relationship between Marxism and Feminism, there is a substantive tradition that I will not cover in this writing. In this regard, it can be consulted on Hartman, 1981; Weeks, 2011; Federici, 2018.

capacities for love” (2011: 255), which not only has repercussions for intimate relationships but also other spheres. For Jónasddóttir, gender inequality not only occurs at a symbolic level but has also materialized in institutions and organizations. For the author, the “core of male domination” lies in the unequal distribution of care and pleasure between men and women, not only in intimate relationships as a couple, marriage, or cohabitation but in other contexts such as work and politics (Jónasddóttir, 1993: 51-52). To Jónasddóttir the point is to undertake an analysis of the “political conditions of love” (1993: 21). Unlike Marx, she conceptualizes the economy and the sphere of love practices as different yet related social processes, (Jónasddóttir, 2011: 248) which are also linked to the legal realm.

According to Jónasddóttir, love is a relational practice rather than a feeling: “Love is understood in a process mode, as relational practical activity” (2018: 18) and sensory (2011: 257) linked to class and ethnic-racial relations, cultural processes, political institutions, and ideological forces (Jónasddóttir, 2011: 253). According to Jónasddóttir, like work, love can also be exploited through two of its components: care and erotic ecstasy. While loving care tends to be demanded from and attributed to women, men are expected to be guided by the desire for ecstasy they obtain from women. This is a social system and does not rely on specific people (Jónasddóttir, 2011: 265). It is the patriarchal system, in which “men benefit to a certain extent unilaterally from the exploitation of the power of women’s love” (Jónasddóttir, 2011: 260). This implies thinking not only about love between couples but about love and other bonds.

As Silvia Federici frames it more radically, capitalist ideology and patriarchy have contributed to the fact that the domestic work required for the reproduction of capital and in general of life, has been constantly ignored and made invisible under the rhetoric of love. So, capital has been very successful “denying housework a

wage and transforming it into an act of love.” (Federici, 1975: 3). Federici makes a stronger criticism of Marx by pointing out that, “at no point in *Capital* does he acknowledge that the reproduction of the labor force involves the unpaid domestic work of women – preparing food, washing clothes, raising children, making love –” (2018: 53). Nowadays, these processes of ‘social reproduction’, are defined by a “crisis of care” (Fraser, 2016), that refers to the pressures to sustain connections related to caring, raising children, maintaining broader communities (2016: 99). For Illouz, this crisis of care brings us closer to the end of love, that is, the emergence of “negative relations” that “are apparent in the conscious decision or non-conscious practices by many men and women to enter stable bonds” (2019: 24).

At the same time, Simmel’s relational-processual legacy allows an interpretation that show how forms of love are transformed over time. Thus, for example, when he refers to love between men in ancient times, he points out how this model of virile love shaped men’s bodies and their sexual practices (Simmel, 1971). The historicization of love makes it possible to uncouple heterosexuality from the erotic sphere, a matter of crucial importance for feminism. In the West, the love bond has been governed by the normativity of the heterosexual couple, which establishes the norms that define the proper ways of relating versus those that escape the norm. In this respect, monogamy has also been questioned particularly as a derivation of bourgeois thought associated with possession (Klesse, 2014: 132) as also pointed out by Marx and feminist Marxism legacy (Semprich, 2018).

A Simmelian processual approach to love makes possible to understand the hierarchies between bodies and their assessment from the cultural form of love. In that way, Ahmed borrows the term “compulsory heterosexuality” from Adrienne Rich, pointing out that: “Hence compulsory heterosexuality shapes which bodies one ‘can’ legitimately approach as would-be lovers and which one

cannot. In shaping one's approach to others, compulsory heterosexuality also shapes one's own body, as a congealed history of past approaches" (Ahmed, 2014: 145). This aspect is also linked to social class and ethnicity, among other conditions that intersect to define hierarchies between "legitimate" and "illegitimate," "valuable" and "not valuable" partners. According to Ahmed (2006), this logic is not exempt from colonial overtones. For example, fantasies of interracial intimacy steer white bodies towards other racial bodies as objects of desire and love, but with the aim of dominating them. The Simmelian sociology of the body would be revitalized by considering these social processes.

Another topic is related to the link between romantic love and violence. In Latin America, Myriam Jimeno points out how Simmel was able to show that in intimate relationships, constant friction with the other forces hostile feelings to be repressed, because of which conflict erupts as an effect of the accumulation of these feelings. The contributions of this author include the observation that there is an "ambiguity of cultural principles governing love and couple relationships" (Jimeno, 2004: 245). This interpretation of Simmel's legacy allows Jimeno to reveal how murder within the framework of love ties is not an "instinctive emotional outburst" but involves the participation of "learned social models" typical of romantic love.¹⁰ What this interpretation of the Simmelian legacy

¹⁰ In a long-term project, Adriana García Andrade and this writer use the Simmelian category "affective structure" in the analysis of love relationships and point out how a mixture of emotions coexists in a love bond, ranging from liking and affection to jealousy, shame and even disgust, based on the expectations of femininity and masculinity that permeate bodies (Sabido Ramos and García Andrade, 2018). Among other analytical frameworks, see García Andrade and Sabido Ramos, 2016.

reveals is how the reappraisal of this author can provide useful explanations in contexts where amorous interaction is not divorced from conflicts, tensions, or the generalization of violence.

A relational reasoning invites us to transcend the love bond as a monad and see its intersection with structural and processual processes. The mandates of romantic love do not only have effects on the private sphere. For example, in Mexico, seduction and falling in love play a key role in the recruitment of trafficking victims, who are mostly women (Torres, 2016: 108; Lamas, 2020: 137). This mechanism operates as a hook for extracting surplus value from bodies (Gago, 2020: 86). In other words, romantic love is an affective device that connects with the modern forms of exploitation of vulnerable bodies in late capitalism. That is why, in the response to violence against women, feminist demands have turned to an “interclass sisterhood” (Gago, 2020: 67). A relational approach would enable us to trace the route of the networks of bodies and affects in intersection with criminal economy networks that are exploited for the valuation of contemporary capital.

6. Conclusions

Coming from different traditions but complementary approaches, Simmel and Marx enable us to establish that human being is a *being with others*. This principle has theoretical and methodological implications for the study of love in late capitalism. While Marx allows us to incorporate the socio-structural and historical level – precisely the *material* dimension – to think about the world of affects, Simmel’s *oeuvre* offer allows us to contend that our affective and bodily condition is not substantial but rather relational insofar as we are always with others. Simmel allows us to incorporate the social process and symbolic exchange – precisely the *cultural* dimension – to consider the affective dimension of social ties. Following Marx, it is possible to highlight the effects of

capitalism in the affective sphere, from alienation to suffering such as that which romantic love can exert. Following Simmel, it is possible to highlight love as a cultural form that links people and that changes historically.

The legacy of Simmel and Marx also urges us to state that ways of feeling, both historical and contingent, can be different. Questioning and resistance to the hegemonic models of romantic love are therefore possible in collective work. The point is that if we follow the tradition of relational thinking, we cannot ignore the fact that the use of our agency is also a relational matter (Dépelteau, 2018: 4). For example, like work in Marx, love is also a creative/productive power “capable of producing change, something new” (Jónasddóttir, 2014: 63). I find this creative possibility in the semantics of certain forms of feminist protest expressed in slogans such as “Romantic love kills”, “Machos kill us”, “My girlfriends take care of me, not the police,” “They don’t take care of us, they rape us,” “The state does not take care of me, my girlfriends do” (Lamas, 2020). But it is also seen in the formation of feminist collectives that incorporate the body into the daily battle against the various forms of patriarchal capitalism (Gago, 2020). If we think of love as a sensory practice (a practical human-sensuous activity) (Jónasddóttir, 2011: 257; 2018: 19), we cannot help pointing out the playful nature of the protests that has also produced its own forms of sensoriality (Simmel, 2009), especially those linked to the sound and kinesthetic realm.¹¹

¹¹ These include the performance of “A rapist in your way” created by LaS’Tesis, which has been reproduced in various parts of the world (Lamas, 2020: 66).

Simmel and Marx offer a program for the relational analysis of love bonds embedded in a network of relations that transcend the intimate sphere. Both authors provide analytical inputs to consider the relationships between love, power, conflict, even resistance. In Mexico, a song by Vivir Quintana called “Canción sin miedo” (Song without fear) has been sung at feminist protests since 2020. One of its verses says: “We sing without fear, we ask for justice / We shout for each woman who has disappeared / Let it ring out: We want each other alive! / Let’s eliminate feminicide” (Quintana, 2020). The song ends with a reference to love in which the Mexican national anthem, a battle hymn, is resignified. Using other references unrelated to the state and violence, Quintana modifies the verses as follows: “And let the earth tremble in its center / To the resounding roar of love” (X2). This is a symbolic expression of the “power of love” and its re-channeling as a “form of energy” (2018: 21) as posited by the Marx-inspired feminism of Jónasddóttir.

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