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PARTE MONOGRAFICA

EMOZIONI E VITA QUOTIDIANA

(a cura di Franco Crespi e Massimo Cerulo)



MASSIMO CERULO

When the love becomes a necessary risk. Simmel, Beck and a sociological analysis of a social emotion

The time will come
when, with elation
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror
and each will smile at the other's welcome

Love after love, Derek Walcott

1. Introduction

In 1990 in Germany a sociological essay, *Das ganz normale Chaos der Liebe* (whose English translation is *The Normal Chaos of Love*), was published by Ulrich Beck and his wife, Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim [Beck, Beck-Gernsheim 1990]. The volume collects some previously published and unpublished articles from the '80s and some new enquiries produced 'together'.

The leading assumption of the whole work concerns the potentially destructive power of love. This latter, based on a recent series of studies, can be also defined as a socio-emotional-sentimental condition [see, Giddens 1992; Boltanski 1993; Massey 2002; Tisseron 2001, 2010; Boiger, Mesquita 2012; Cerulo 2009, 2015; Turner 2009; Rimé 2009] due to its double value. Love is both an instantaneous emotion, which enthrals and makes you quiver, and a long-lasting social

feeling, which acts as binding agent among individuals, as also the Becks argue. They claim that in the so-called society of ‘second modernity’ [see, Beck 1992], love appears as necessary to the aim of reaching (or, at least, getting close to) both social recognition and the meaning of life craved by any social being.

Beck’s starting point is the well known claim shared in his internationally renown studies: the globalised society’s individualization has placed the individuals outside ‘old’ social rules, providing them with great freedom of choice, and by consequence exposing them to great risk. Greater freedom translates into greater insecurity. Such an equivalence is well accounted for by sociological studies since Simmel’s investigations on the ambivalence of modernity [see, Simmel 1903, 1908].

In order to ground his claims, Beck opens a dialogue with his wife, the psycho-sociologist Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. The dialogue takes place through the ‘exchange’ of chapters, each mirroring a different perspective, on the emotional-sentimental condition of love.

What on earth motivates people – ask the Becks as a leading question to the entire work – to give up on a portion of one’s ego’s freedom in exchange for a family? And why, after a while, many of those people decide to leave the conjugal nest in search of new couple experiences or ‘single life’ experiences?

The contradictions between the job market requirements and the love relationship requirements (family, marriage, maternity, paternity, friendship) are thus thoroughly reviewed.

However, the two German scholars focus exclusively on the investigation of the features of the German federal society – when the work was published the Wall hadn’t yet fallen – which makes the generalisation of the work rather difficult. Provided the book could have ever been labelled as a ‘classic’, its tight scope makes it less likely. To be fair, the reader is sometimes under the impression that they are venturing into the sociology of family, sometimes that they are scrutinizing the German welfare system.

Now, ‘in their defence’, it should be emphasized that a scientifically sound dialogue on love might be impossible due to the amplitude of the concept itself. What’s more, any attempt in this direction means to ‘crash’ against those sociology’s sacred names who devoted thorough investigations to the subject. The reference is here, in particular, to Georg Simmel and to his posthumously publi-

shed *On love (a fragment)*, in “On women, sexuality and love” (originally part of *Fragmente und Aufsätze aus dem Nachlass*, Drei Masken Verlag, 1923), but also to Niklas Luhmann and his *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy* [1982, En. tr. 1986]. Based on this framework, I shall in the following formulate three main remarks and a recapitulative account, in the attempt to: a) clarify the methodology of dialogue established by the Becks also in the light of their historical-social context of reference; b) draw a comparison with Simmel’s account; c) bring up to date the Becks’ contribution based upon recent works on the sociology of emotions.

2. *First remark: love in daily life*

The Becks mainly focus on the concept of love within a couple. They study love in reference to the family and to the care of both partners-spouses and children.

The main claim developed within the essay may be summed up as follows: due to the breakdown of traditional family structures, the partners-spouses are responsible for making sense of their union, while trying mostly to protect and coordinate the couple relationship with the requests of the job market.

The dialogue among them is vital, inasmuch as it is a symptom of the monitoring of the relationship and of critical reflexivity on their actions. Furthermore, dialogue is also a symptom of recognition, which is arguably a crucial element in Beck’s theory – despite the surprisingly missing reference to the well-known studies by Axel Honneth on the concept and process of recognition [see, Honneth 2011]. It could be here remarked that Beck possibly suffered so-to-speak from some sort of ‘inferiority complex’, which in those years affected many sociologists not directly coming from or in contact with the Institute for Social Research of Frankfurt, pulsing heart of the critical theory and point of reference worldwide for philosophical and sociological studies.

Beck chooses to talk about love with his wife. This means to talk about himself. Despite the effort to focus the enquiry on third subjects and work on a general level, it is inevitable for the reader to get some impressions and images of what is their love for them. The work is finally a form of self-recognition through a

story, which is also a common psychoanalytic practice, that of observing and studying other people love condition in order to reflect upon your own [see, Dufourmantelle 2009]. However, between experiences and stories, as Benjamin tells us, there is a significant gap.

We all know that emotions are culturally situated. Beck is, therefore, affected by the cultural climate of his time and by his context of reference. He often quotes, for instance, the legal system of the German Federal Republic.

Love is the place, or yet another place, of modern secularisation. Besides the strictly speaking political secularisation – the transition from the religious aura to the State realm – a second secularisation took place in the form of a transition from the aura of the divine experience to the love experience. In this respect, the Becks refer to love as to the religion of modern times [Beck 1990] and the consolidation of a new existential secularism. As matter of fact, love has become an enchanted experience within a globally disenchanting world. In such a context, many daily life anxieties look for solutions in new realms. Love is possibly the predominant one since, differently from religion, it paves the way to an idea of original transcendence generating social egalitarianism.

Within this framework of discussion, the importance of the daily life is clear. It is actually the background of more or less repetitive experiences and routines, among which love and the whole realm of sense it provides appear as indispensable. Thanks to love, which is the extraordinary ordinary element of daily life, the double promise of conversion of the ordinary into the extraordinary and of the extraordinary into the ordinary is fulfilled.

As recently argued by Danilo Martuccelli [2013], the growing importance of the daily life, and the core of love as source of meaning, can also be given a very different explanation, for instance, as the side effect of the increase of available time besides work and sleep. As Jean Viard stresses, such a time extension provides our lives with two equally important centres of gravity, work and free time. It is not fully absurd, then, to link the extension of life expectancy, from the 1900s, and the growing expansion of love demand. While in 1900 work and sleep would take up 70% of the available life time, today they do not make up for more than 40% combined. In absolute terms, from 100.000 hours available besides work and sleep in 1900, we reached almost 400.000 hours today [Viard 2011, 14, 15,

32]. It is a fundamental difference. We live ‘more’ and therefore we have – or want to have – compared to previous generations, ‘many’ lives (both professionally and emotionally) within just ‘one’. At any rate, the objective surplus of life time leads to the fact that spare time, the time available besides work and sleep, hence our daily life, is much more important and significant now than in the past. Finally, such a timeframe and life realm – the daily life – have been widely invested with and absorbed by love-related concerns [Martuccelli 2013, 161].

In this regard, the Becks emphasize how love became some form or social binding factor both within the members of a couple and among social individuals who get in contact through relational forms revolving around values (national pride, faith, family, etc.). Love is thus understood as a form of social interaction and means of integration in modern societies. On this very point, I believe it is interesting to draw a parallel with the account provided more than a century ago by Simmel, who shed light on the emotional-sentimental condition of love as among modernity main forms of social interaction.

3. Second remark: Simmel and Beck between similarities and differences

In the chapters on love in the ‘second modernity’ Beck follows almost blindly Simmel’s theory. It might be then useful to briefly outline it as the main model and royal road for Beck’s enquiry.

According to Simmel, modernity’s main feature is ambivalence. On the one hand the individual is forced to come to terms with his/her unavoidable solitude as directly linked to the fragmentation of work and family life. On the other hand, such a solitude allows the subject to venture into unexplored paths and let go in the research of countless experiences. The subject selects one path among thousands of options, and such a tension or splendour of possibilities taints modern existences of an irresistible charm:

[This is the] tragic ambiguity which pervades the very roots of every societal formation, of every formation of a unit out of units. The individual who lives from his inner resources, who can answer for his actions only if they are directed by his own conviction, is supposed

to orient his will toward the purposes of others. As something ethical, this remains always a matter of his own will; it flows from the innermost core of his personality. But what is more, he is also supposed to become, in his self-based existence, a member of a collectivity which has its center outside of him. We are not discussing here particular harmonies or collisions of these two claims. The point, rather, is that man internally stands under two, mutually alien norms; that our movement revolving around our own center (something totally different from egoism) claims to be as definitive as the movement around the social center; in fact, it claims to be the decisive meaning of life [Simmel 1950, 248].

One key point of Simmel's theory is the idea according to which, although emotions are integral part of men and women, in their manifestation they take up features which go beyond the singularity of the individual, thus becoming social phenomena. They are indeed the result of social interactions and social constructions enacted by the subjects belonging to a given culture. In other words, the crucial point of Simmel's account on emotions is that they are a constitutive element of the subject together with the rational element. Emotion and reason form a strong bond accounting for the nucleus of the modern individual.

Such a perspective is fruitfully applied by the German sociologist also to the feeling of love. According to Simmel, love is mainly a form of interaction. Through the study of love experiences it is possible to discover a lot on the subject's habits and on the society he/she inhabits.

Simmel claims love to be mainly a free interaction, direct and purposeless, free from any kind of utilitarian interest and light years away from the instrumental reasoning typical of modern society. Such a form of love stands half way between the *amour passion* and sociability. It is not impenetrable to ambivalences, but rather feeds on it. On the one hand, being emancipated from the family realm which was previously its main space of disclosure, love is now so free to express itself that the subject is given the possibility to live several relations. On the other hand, due to the need for another person and the compulsory sharing of one's ego, love relationships become essentially tragic and individual: Simmel speaks of an «overtone of the tragic» which adheres to every great love because the pure experience of love is self-contained, an end in itself [Simmel 1923].

In such a situation, the subject, who is forced to come to terms with its unavoidable solitude as basic constituent of the experience of modernity [see, Turnaturi

1994], is nevertheless constantly looking for some form of consistency grounding the two-people relationship. It is still the focal point of the tension between bridge and door, that is to say between individualism – the upholder of uniqueness and self-realisation as well as solitude – and vitalism – responsible for multiple intersubjective relations as well as for differentiation and fragmentation.

The subject envisaged by Simmel is a *consistent* individual inasmuch as it has the marks of conflict and multiplicity, it is open to change, to the fatigue of metamorphosis. By consistency it is here understood some sort of holding things together, however clumsily and unsteadily, within one unique amalgamation which is constantly re-kneaded and re-mixed: «The consistency subject is, then, along the line of the dough metaphor, continuously rising, continuously growing and changing around its own inalienable *ubi consistam*» [Turnaturi 1994, 120].

Several significant similarities might be pointed out here in relation to Beck's suggestions. This latter seems to almost 'repeat' Simmel with some updates from the '80s. Love is consistent according to Beck inasmuch as it ties together individuals sailing through the dangerous seas of the globalised society of the '80s, whose main features are the disintegration of families, easily changed jobs, and the invasiveness of the market. It is so consistent that it becomes some sort of social bond between subjects looking for reciprocal acknowledgement in the midst of daily fatigues and disappointments.

The two authors differ instead as it comes to the fact that Simmel's account takes consistency to be also the constant research for individuality through the other. Once again ambivalence shines through. While the subject envisaged by Simmel tends to escape the responsibilities entailed by any two-people experience, it also feels the urge to continuously look for the other and try out different experiences together. It is torn between unity and multiplicity, between the desire to dare to meet the other and the fear to never find itself again.

According to Simmel – differently from Beck, who does not venture very deep – love is a hurricane subverting the whole individual: the «totalising experience of one's own totality»¹ [Turnaturi 1994, 18]. Only through love the other can be addressed as a whole, differently from utilitarian interactions, for

1. It should be remarked that the depth of Simmel's account is due to the still strong influence of the romantic model of love besides Nietzsche's vitalism.

instance, where just a part of oneself is at stake and mainly instrumental rationality is called upon.

According to Simmel, love establishes a relationship between two totalities: two subjects reveal themselves to each other for what they truly are and not only for that part that they wish or feel compelled to show.

Simmel often reinforces the reference to unity as the turning point of his philosophy of love. His idea of love is that of a revolutionary power, which is able to subvert and disturb the existing reality, and at the same time transform the subjects, reshape their relations, thus creating a new order and, after all, a new social reality which is available only to the subjects involved in the interaction. Through the experience of love, they indeed create their 'landscape of love'. The external world, i.e. the reality, has a different outlook in the eyes of those who are in love. In the company of the beloved one everything changes, all perspectives are altered, the world looks better than what it actually is. Love experiences are thus some sort of experiential bridge. Through them you are pushed to act, be active in the world, and not shut it out. Many elements are once more shared by Beck's account, that also identifies love as something able to order two previously disorderly and strongly individualized single experiences. As a result, some form of two-people shared life is made possible.

According to Simmel, then, love follows in the steps of individuality, that is to say it is likely to be marked by the unavoidable ambiguity identifying modern individuals:

All that is called individuality, as a state of being, a sensibility, or as an aspiration, expresses a quality of behaviour irreducible to any more primordial instinct, one that is unknown among non-human animals. On the one hand, it always means relating to a more or less larger or smaller world in ways that can be either practical or ideal, negative or affirmative, ruling or subservient, indifferent or passionate; but on the other hand, it also means that individuals comprise a world for themselves and are centred in them-selves, as self-sufficient unitary beings. This double existence disrupts the earthly life of every recognizably 'single' reflective being; for on the one hand, all individuals rest within themselves, whether formally or substantively, as unities with a certain intrinsic being, meaning or purpose of their own; but on the other hand, they are parts of one or many wholes that exist outside of them as an encompassing totality towering above them. They are always at once member and body, part and whole, complete and incomplete.

Individuality is what we call the form in which an attempt is made to unify these dual poles of human existence [Simmel 2007, 67].

Furthermore, the subject is in need of the other, since only thanks to its presence the experience of love is possible. Thanks to the ‘contamination’ with the other, one may reach an external perspective on oneself and drill down on one’s self-relationship.

Differently, in the second modernity outlined by Beck, according to the investigation of the love relationships in which the individuals venture, the vitalistic outburst defining Simmel’s idea of love experience is somehow missing. Love, as accounted for by Beck, is some kind of social glue keeping together spouses-partners (in first, second, or third marriages) as well as supporting child-care. Love is not, then, an individual experience – here strongly at variance with Simmel’s account – but rather a communication tool – here the reference to Luhmann is strong – as well as a code to settle in the globalised society.

Beck is also persuaded of the emotional charge of love, that means that the social glue is not long-lasting, due to the several possibilities made available by the society people work and live in. Love is, then, both a social bond, at a given and limited time (love-feeling), and an experiential impulse generating new forms of interaction (love-emotion). Here, Beck closely follows Luhmann’s account in *Love as Passion*:

Were there any limits placed on excessiveness? Because it obtained to no negative form, excessiveness possessed internally no limits and there was thus no curb on pushiness, desire or expectations. It was quite clearly not assumed that what was suited to the individuality of a personality, or what could be expected or demanded of a particular person (in contrast to all others) itself amounted to a limit. Yet, this love, limitless in all factual and social respects, was at the same time limited in another respect, namely temporally. Love inevitably ends, *and indeed faster than does beauty*, in other words, *faster than nature*; its end is not accorded a place in the general decline of the cosmos, but is self-determined. Love lasts only a short time, and its end compensates for the absence of all other limits. The essence of love itself, excessiveness, is the very reason for its end [Luhmann 1986, 112].

Would it then be appropriate to talk about a line of continuity Simmel-Luhmann-Beck? No definitive answer can be provided here. More thorough philological investigations should be preliminarily carried out. It can be argued, though, that Beck takes love as the fundamentalism of modernity [Beck, Beck-Gernsheim 1990]. Power engine of globalised society, in favour and against the rules imposed by the invasive job market, love is also the opponent of any means-end rationality.

4. Third remark: emotions between market and work

Now, I would like to point to Beck's general agreement with two studies of fundamental importance both for the sociology of daily life and for that of emotions. Notably, I refer here to the studies of the American sociologist, Arlie R. Hochschild (antecedent to Beck's volume) and to those of the Moroccan sociologist, Eva Illouz (subsequent to it).

In her '80s researches on the sphere of intimacy and on the relation between public realm and private realm, Hochschild reveals the crisis affecting most (American) couples struggling to find the right balance between professional life and family management [see, Hochschild 1983]. According to Hochschild, as to Beck, the market has a major oppressive role in daily emotional practices. It fills the cultural void left by the weakening of family and community bonds, to the point of creating a problem as soon as it becomes an end in itself and no other cultural or political force is able to discipline its effects.

In this regard, Beck emphasizes how the process of individualisation, hence of freedom and autonomy from bonds, is nourished by the job market rules, envisaging flexible subjects with their luggages always ready for the sake of their careers. The market has a deciding role in the development of intimate and emotional relationships, favouring the creation of weak bonds within the household, the partners, and the group one belongs to.

The so-called crisis of emotions within social relationships clearly displays its effects whenever the family is taken into account. In her enquiry on American families, Hochschild claims that our society transitioned out from the frying pan

of the patriarchal regime into the fire of the capitalist market individualism. From the extended family to the nuclear family, the emotions are repressed in order to avoid any form of moral perturbation, and the parents duties are delegated to the market (nursery services, parental consultancies, baby sitting services, etc.).

Along with this process, what in her later studies Hochschild has defined as «culture of coldness' spreads», since the individuals are forced to delegate the management of their private needs to the public, and they tend to become economisers and rational administrators of their own affective needs [see, Hochschild 2003]. People seek shelter in their work, which is then taken as the main source of security, and ask the market to satisfy their needs – such a request resulting in the strengthening of their individualism.

Eva Illouz claims, instead, that the development of capitalism has gone hand in hand with the development of a highly specialized «emotional culture» [see, Illouz 2007]. According to Illouz, the emotional sphere and the intimacy one have progressively «cooled down», in order to comply to the rules and models of interactions imposed by the rational, efficient, and capitalist market as well as by instrumental reasoning.

In this regard, the author refers to an 'emotional capitalism', meaning by that a whole culture where emotional and economic discourses and practices are reciprocally modelled on one another, thus producing a wide movement, in which feeling is the main factor of economic behaviours, and the emotional life follows the rules of economic relations and exchanges [see, Illouz 2007].

According to Illouz, emotional capitalism harnesses emotions to the service of instrumental action. This results in a strong rationalization of sentimental bonds within intimate and private interactions, which could lead to a detachment between the felt emotion and the feeling subject. In this respect, intimate relations become 'functionalised', that is to say they transform into merchandisable and interchangeable objects on the market of sentimental relations. In other words, Illouz outlines a two-ways relationship between capitalism and emotions: while the market rules tend to shape interpersonal relations, the relations themselves lie at the core of economic interests. Emotions are sold and bought on the market as any other good [see, Illouz 2007].

According to Illouz, emotions shape the emotional *habitus* of the subject, which, besides being a tool for social classification, affects the forms of happiness

and social wellness characterizing each individual. The more one is able to keep cool in the display of one's own emotional status, to be rational and strategic in their usage, the higher the chances to progress in one's careers, hold power, climb high up in the social stratification.

The author warns the reader about the constant use of instrumental rationality (*Wertrationalität*) in contemporary relations, as a cognitive style is created which is able to take from sentimental relations their specific identity, devaluating and transforming them into objects, which, assessed on the market standard basis, such as equality and needs satisfaction, tend to share the destiny and the soulless existence of exchangeable goods.

Differently from Illouz, the Becks' claim – which is antecedent to Illouz' studies – is that in a world deprived of safe external anchoring – unemployment, physical and psychic pathologies, the collapse of the traditional family structure, etc. – the two-people relationship is addressed in order to make sense of one's existence. Love, after having risked to disappear in the rise of modern and post-modern society with all its freedom and individuality of choices and possibilities among several *ad-ventures*, comes back to the top as the shelter and comfort from all the turmoil of the contemporary time.

5. Recapitulative account: love after love

To recapitulate: along the lines of early Frankfurt scholars (although he never studied or visited the Institute of Social Research), Beck attempts a sociological investigation of the emotion-feeling par excellence, love, within a 'dialogue' with his wife and applying his theories on the society of risk.

They both claim that love is a necessary risk – clear euphemism – and their position may be explained through two sets of reasons:

Love relationships are unfathomable. Both in the case of romantic-love and, especially, in the case of love-passion, it is impossible to know whether or how it will last in time. On this basis, starting love relationships is risky, despite the fact that nobody is likely to give up on it. Given that modernity is the time of the surplus of possibilities, – here an echo of

Simmel's account – love encompasses many of them according to its context and culture of reference. For instance, the emotion of love opens up to the realm of sexual intercourses. After the weakening of community bonds, the post-modern subject asks love – broadly understood – to satisfy needs and desires, while providing temporary securities. The same role was previously covered by the community group one used to belong to and very little space was left 'outside' normative contexts. Today, love is a new form of community bond (the sharing of love experiences through narration should come to mind), as well as an element of security as members of a given context. In the [common] sentence *I'm also in love*, 'also' refers to being like the others. 'Being like' is a crucial concept, as made clear by Jedlowsky, who claims that it «introduces within desire the relation to a given normative request. Identifying oneself with the other corresponds to the introjection of a model. Moreover, it also suggests that the desired object is immediately suited to complex games of diffraction and triangulation» [Jedlowski 2014 my tr.].

As clearly explained by Beck-Gernsheim, marriages build one's own social reality, create identities, people look for themselves through their spouse. Everyone needs love in the post-modernity, and everyone simultaneously has the desire to escape from it in order to find many more hinging on changing biographical trajectories.

Clearly, the reason why Beck decides to investigate love, after dedicating his scholarly biographical trajectory to other topics, is that love permeates our society, its images, representations, public discourse. It is an emotional imperative, the inspiration of writers, playwrights, film directors.

Recently, Danilo Martuccelli, who counts among the most refined social scientists of our time, wrote:

While it is maybe an exaggeration to claim that love experiences are the direct and skilfully orchestrated result of cultural industries, it is however clear that its widespread generalisation is inseparable from its massive representation in advertising, novels, films and songs. The importance of love is directly linked to the constant development of narrative intrigues and cultural representations concerning an experience which is described as equally unexpected, unique, enchanted, and ordinary. At any rate, only after such an explosion of imagination we actually transitioned from societies where love was rare – or extraordinary – to the point of not even having a precise social function (as proven by the lack of legal recognition of love-based marriages for many centuries), towards societies where love, instead, is taken as an indispensable experience common to everybody's existence. Love is now an emotional imperative. It is therefore impossible, for instance, to conceive of our

lives – or even normality and psychological maturity – outside of love; and its absence is taken – and sometimes diagnosed – as a personal failure [Martuccelli 2013, 159 my tr.].

Paradoxical and oxymoronic: risk is transformed into security. The whole point fits into the ambivalence characterising, as stated by Simmel, love itself.

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