Psychosocial Feelings within Simmel’s Sociology

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Before I introduce you to the key question of my article, let me tell a story about Erving Goffman, which is supposed to have gone to a canteen, waited for another person to leave his/her seat and dish to look for mustard or salt & pepper, and then sat at his/her place to eat his/her dish before he/she came back.¹ In doing this, he showed that his behaviour would break the basic trust which supports the most futile activities in our daily life, the diffuse feeling of confidence, which assures in us an ontological security. This security allows us to dedicate ourselves to trivial activities (e.g. looking for mustard), without fearing that some intruder could eat the dish we leave behind. The lesson from this story, is that our social life is based on inconsiderable little things, which nevertheless involve a whole complex of presuppositions that we take for granted, such as normal appearances or expected attitudes. It also demonstrates the importance of a feeling of general confidence that sustains the routines of everyday life, assuring a coordination a minima by the means of a polite inattention. This confidence is a form of trust and belief; it assumes a suitable development of events, and it enables anticipations on the actions of other actors.

The question of the coordination of social actions, of social worlds or of socialization forms, has always been a major topic in sociology. And far before the times of sociology, this was a subject matter of social philosophy as well. Which general dispositions could facilitate such a coordination? The answer suggested by the Scottish School of moral sentiments – Ferguson, Hutchinson, Shaftesbury – is generosity or kindness. Adam Ferguson remarks that every language is full of terms and phrases that express a certain je ne sais quoi somewhat different from success or from failure in the commerce between people. Not all actions are regulated according to a strategic model, or motivated by one’s own interest. So could Adam Smith take sympathy into account in his theory of moral feelings. And it is also in reference to socializations, that Simmel will propose an analysis of such psychosocial feelings, insisting particularly on confidence. The conceptual status of such a feeling, which is hardly suited for any measures, can be contested, and we recently witnessed once more the development of theories which tend to reduce the problem of confidence to a pure question of interest, of calculation of interests, like the rational choice theory. In contrast to them, Simmel tries to define trust within human relationships themselves through the description of the a priori conditions which make society possible. He is looking for the conditions which leave out any judgement on the convenience or the inconvenience of acts, and which are beyond interest or calculation. His perspective supposes that we “accede to the profound layer that allows to find the conditions of concrete and vivid associations

¹ Winkin reports this experience in the “subjunctive” (Winkin in: Goffman 1981: 97-98).
among people”, and that we “reconstruct social life such as the experience renders it.” 2 His phenomenological descriptions of psychosocial feelings lead to such sociological investigations. These feelings are not only present in numerous socializations, but they also constitute a conceptual means within the theory of comprehension that Simmel intends to build.

If one goes through all the chapters of the so called “Great Sociology” of 1908, the role granted to the psychosocial feelings in the description of reciprocal bonds is quite astonishing. I would like to show that their use derives from the inventive separation that Simmel establishes between sociology and psychology. At that time, he had already elaborated an analogous difference, but in respect to history and psychology. In his Problems of the Philosophy of History Simmel has underlined the necessity of a psychological a priori. In his first chapter of Sociology, he affirms that

“there is no doubt that whatever of historico-social existence is within our means of comprehension, is nothing else than psychical concatenations which we reconstruct with either instinctive or methodical psychology, and bring to subjective plausibility, to a feeling of the psychical necessity of the developments in question. To that extent every history, every depicting of a social condition, is an exercise of psychological knowing. But it is a matter of extreme methodological necessity, and directly decisive for the principles of the psychical sciences in general, that the scientific treatment of psychical facts still by no means needs to be psychology. Even where we uninterruptedly employ psychological rules and perceptions, where the explanation of each separate fact is possible only in the psychological way, as is the case in sociology, the sense and intention of this procedure by no means need to lead to psychology, i. e., not to the law of the psychic process, which process alone, to be sure, can carry a definite content; but the procedure leads only to this content and its configuration” (Simmel 2008: 490-491).

Such a psychological knowledge comes closer to “the treasure of our nomological experiential knowledge,” to re-echo one of Weber’s expressions – a knowledge without which we could hardly interpret the social activities surrounding us, let alone analyse them at a sociological level. Simmel suggests to use a common interpretative knowledge which draws upon the socialization of the sociologist itself, and which is part of the knowledge that socialized individuals possess: it is the fact that they know they are associated to other individuals through forms of socialization.

Psychological rules and knowledge rely on psychosocial feelings – feelings from which, if they are present, we know in general the most frequent and most usual consequences to expect during the course of reciprocal actions.

We also have to consider that psychosocial feelings serve as a basis for the socialization forms. They constitute either the content of socialization, or they enable the process of socialization by accompanying it and creating a favourable affective mood But what are they? Without being exhaustive, I would compile the following list: on the one hand one can mention confidence, sympathy, gratefulness, piety, devotion, fidelity, gratitude, intimacy, faith, honour, loyalty, forgiveness, reconciliation – and on the other hand envy, grudge, jealousy, hate, distrust or hostility. 3 This vocabulary of passionate and emotional feelings that Simmel calls psycho-sociological, reminds inter alia rather of Gracian,

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2 Simmel (Simmel 2002: 158, 174).
3 Concerning Simmel on hostility, see Rol (Rol 2006: 137-175).