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Simmel's Actuality in the Light of Migratory Processes

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Abstract

The present paper aims to reflect over the social figure of the foreigner in the light of the current condition of migrants fleeing from countries at war. The analysis is rooted in the thought of Georg Simmel, his conception of society as a set of social relations through which it is possible to know and understand the attitudes and the appearance of society itself.

It traces the author's thought, who intuited more than a century ago, the dual role of the foreigner to be either a guest/traveller or a citizen of arrival contexts. Their image linked to the concept of a stranger, that of being never completely close, but at the same time an indispensable function, which produces consequences for the construction of social exchanges and relationships.

A reinterpretation of Simmel and its pregnant relevance are the background of such work, aimed at embracing new arguments.

Keywords: foreigner, Simmel, integration, society.

1. Integration in a sociological perspective

In contemporary society, the role of migration in the processes of transformation of society appears to be central. The current issue is the theme of integration, that is, how men and women with stories, backgrounds, ethnic groups, different religions, are able to coexist on a limited territorial space.

Integration can be understood as a process in which immigrants become members to equal rights and opportunities, based on the willingness of the majority of individuals who make up the community to regularly and effectively coordinate their actions with those of other individuals at different

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levels of the social structure, scoring a relatively low degree of conflict (Gallino, 2006).

Immigrants' social integration can also be analyzed as a process in which different distributions of power are compared among the groups of a territorial community. Moreover and negatively, as the power of a group imposing a series of stereotypes in society making the road of integration more complex. Furthermore, this term allows to better understand the process of reciprocal interpenetration between the recipient society and the newcomers (Ambrosini, 2008).

Speaking of integration today implies to reflect concretely over the interdependence of factors taking place at a micro level (of individual experiences), meso (management aspects of services and institutions) and macro (migration policies and immigrant flows), through the involvement of a plurality of social actors who do not reflect cultures, understood as rigid and unchangeable entities. Cultural identity is fluid, changing and constantly redefined by conveniences, situations and interlocutors within an incessant negotiation (Dal Lago, 2005).

Many researches conducted at international, national or local levels point out that, in the face of successful and fully integrated experiences, immigrants still have significant integration deficits, both from a social and cultural point of view as well as from an economic and political point of view (Berti, Valzania, 2010).

For a better comprehension of the phenomenon, it is possible to describe the main approaches adopted today by the hosting communities in an attempt to think about and deal with this process.

In fact, integration policies belong to the most strictly practical and relational sphere of the migratory phenomenon, they are structured and oriented according to the role attributed to the dominant culture and social openness towards migrants, giving rise to different models:

- *Melting pot*: a social process aiming to redefine the system of belonging and identities through the mixing of individuals and cultural and ethnic groups. The basic idea is to promote peaceful coexistence, minimizing social conflicts.

- *Massimazionist pattern*: considers assimilation as a process that inevitably occurs on an intergenerational level as time passes by. It is the migrants who assimilate into the new social context and who must become similar to the natives, assuming their mental clothes and lifestyles, thus being able to be accepted, to progress in the social scale without jeopardizing the balance of the recipient society. Migrants abandon their minority status to conform to the dominant model.

- *Functionalist pattern*: it inserts migrants in some specific social contexts according to the principle of differential exclusion. The perspective is that of a temporary stay as a worker-guest, who is therefore invited to put aside their specific characteristics. The dominant culture remains the autochthonous and foreigners are instrumental factors for the economic development of the nation.

- *Multi-cultural pattern* proposes an uncritical acceptance of pluralism, which in a certain way represents differences, by grouping individuals within "ethnic containers" and fueling potential phenomena of self-ghettoization. Protecting minorities means promoting a preservation of anachronistic diversity, with respect to the ideal of openness that multiculturalism intends to support, thus maintaining a certain distance from the majority and preventing individual memberships from mixing.

- *Transactional pattern*: analyses migrations as experiences of globalization from the bottom, immigrants are considered as social actors that move within the context of reference, both start and arrival, in relation to family expectations, community relations and subjective motivations.

- *Intercultural model*: it considers the dialogue between different cultures a distinctive element, with their consequent mutual openness and with particular attention to the cultural transformations taking place. In this perspective, integration can be defined as a multidimensional process aimed at a peaceful coexistence within a given social reality between culturally and ethnically diverse individuals and groups, based on the respect for diversity provided that the above mentioned ones do not endanger fundamental human rights and democratic institutions (Cesareo, 2004).

The reading of these patterns yields a reflection: the conceptual perspectives of integration do not allow to closely see in what forms the political decisions are translated, as effectively the integration asserts itself in a social context rather than in another, in this way we tend to interpret the development of interethnic relations only from a macro perspective.

The management of integration policies is instead a social practice that needs to be tackled at the micro level and that dates back to the beginning of the 20th century when one person among the various members of the sociological panorama focuses on a particular social figure: the stranger. The scholar is Georg Simmel and this figure represents in the author an instrument for the study and the analysis of social structures; he considers society as a set of social relations through which it is possible to know and understand the attitudes and the appearance of society itself.

Simmel understands the dual role of the foreigner to be both a guest/traveller and a citizen of the arrival contexts, their image is linked to the concept of extraneous, different and their objective condition is confined in a

structured image: that of being never completely close. The foreigner also has an indispensable function though, which produces consequences for the construction of social exchanges and relations.

Let us get deeper into his study.

2. The foreigner in Simmel

Georg Simmel's interest in the topic of immigration is present in many reflections of contemporary authors¹, the Berlin scholar is in fact an important reference point in relation to the topics concerning the dynamics of social inclusion/exclusion. In his question 'How is society possible?', he wonders about the nature and characteristics of this process.

His contribution is core in the reconstruction of some social figures such as the poor, the foreigner, the migrant, with an original point of theoretical and hermeneutical observation.

Simmel was named 'the first sociologist of modernity' (Frisby, 1992), who managed to outline the characteristics of the contemporary individual with acumen and originality, making his thought current and furrowing the different periods of history. His vision of the foreigner, in relation to the complex situation of the migration of peoples at war to Europe, appears extremely poignant today.

Foreigner is what the Greeks defined with the term *apolis*, or even *atopos*, without place, but also 'strange' not properly in consonance with the system it inhabits. Therefore the image of the foreigner is connected to the meaning of stranger, different, never completely close, since his status is closed in a structured picture, far from common sense.

Simmel himself felt a foreigner because he was, a Jew who never managed to settle himself in an academic position and his scientific legacy was acknowledged only after many years.

The stranger is not understood as the Wayfarer, who is passing and destined to go away, but as the one who remains a potential traveller, who, has not still overcome completely that feeling of the detachment of those who arrive and start over again, despite not having kept on moving.

He is not understood as a tourist, but 'he who comes in today and tomorrow remains', the one who will be part of the everyday life of the people from whom he will be accepted.

¹ The writings on the author are many, by way of example see: Corradi, Pacelli, Santambrogio (2010); Cotesta, Bontempi, Nocenzi (2010); Mele (2007); Federici, Picchio (2013).

However, its position is essentially determined by a spatial sphere, by the fact that it does not belong to it from the outset, by the fact that it inserts in this space qualities which do not derive from it and cannot derive therefrom.

He is fixed within a certain scope whose limits are analogous to spatial ones. The stranger is placed in front of the community but out of it and this position creates the condition of extraneous. Being 'foreigner means in fact covering a twofold but contemporary position of distance and proximity' (Simmel, 1908: 50).

The enemy and the alien placed outside the group, symbolically mark the boundaries of the group and the otherness of the group itself. At a practical level, within a conflict, the foreigner constitutes the threat from which the whole group must defend itself, resulting in a strengthening of the internal unity and the identity of the group.

Where the conflict is purely a means to a higher purpose, nothing prevents from limiting it or even avoiding it, if it can be replaced by other measures assuring the same guarantee of success. Where, instead, the conflict is exclusively provoked by subjective sentiments, where there are inner energies that can only be satisfied through the struggle, its substitution by other means is unthinkable; it is an end in itself (Simmel, 1908).

With this statement Simmel makes a distinction between a type of conflict for which '[...] The struggle is only a means to an end [...] The conflict is only one of several functional alternatives' (Coser, 1965: 54) and a conflict as a purpose; In that case '[...] The conflict arises only from aggressive impulses that seek an outburst on a whichever object, where in the conflict the choice of the object is purely accidental' (Coser, 1965).

Simmel is the first to argue that not only the conflict as a reciprocal action (*Wechselwirkung*) dissolves social relations, but also generates them, which seems obvious to us today. It is an 'internal enemy', one who shows different own elements, but which are already inside the system which it is part of, in other words, it is an element of the group itself.

The failure of multiculturalism largely depends on the extreme defense to preserve the particular, increasing a ghettoisation of the different, instead of overcoming it. However, today the mobility of borders is the prerequisite for the construction of fluid social interactions, in continuous construction and experimentation (Colacicco, 2010).

On the other hand, mobility constitutes for this author the true Essence of modern society (Frisby, 1992). Simmel's description of modern experience is closely interwoven with the idea of movement: the modern world is reduced to an incessant flow.

The figure of the foreigner then finds its own definition in relation to its social positioning, or in the 'social distance' between him and the others.

Cipollini (2004) affirms that the social figure of the foreigner, the characteristics that it takes on in the social space and the system of relations it establishes with the members of the integrated group have kept the sociologists engaged onto reflection since the beginning of '900

The unity of nearness and distance, implied in every relationship between men has reached here a constellation, which can be formulated in the shortest way in this sense: the distance within the relationship means that the close person is far away, being foreigner, on the other hand, means that the distant person is close. This ambivalence attached to the figure by Simmel, that is to be near and far, internal and external in a society at the same time, highlights one of the most important characteristics of the figure of the stranger, namely objectivity. The objectivity of the foreigner constitutes a fundamental peculiarity within a society: the foreigner is an ideal judge in the disputes of a community, because it is within it and at the same time not being involved in personal relationships or intimate ties. Yet the personality of the foreigner translates into its 'objectivity' that derives from its inherent ability to distance itself to be precisely, near and far at the same time. The objective man is more free, is not bound by prejudices or traditions. Finally the relationship established with the foreigner is of a more abstract type than the other ones; the foreigner is considered for his more general qualities.

According to many scholars, space constitutes one of the structural principles underlying the 'Simmellian' sociology, intending with this term the basic categories of this author's thought. For example Cavalli (1977), identifies four fundamental concepts in the sociology of Simmel: the dualistic dimension, whereby all social forms arise from the encounter of opposite tendencies; the spatial dimension, the time dimension, and the numeric one.

Whatever the content of these relationships is (economic, affective, political) starting from space, a specificity of the interaction relationship is defined. The spatial forms are therefore those configurations of social relations which find their concretization in the space. The author considers different characteristics of the space: exclusivity, existence of boundaries, fixation, closeness and distance, mobility, are just as many ways to experience the space which then 'grow together' in specific spatial configurations.

Migrants 'are ontologically out of place and not just because they may stay; above all they exert, knowingly or not, the claim not to live in the space, territorial or cultural, they were assigned by the fate, but in another space. They are, in short, individuals who will also have an identity (language, religion, cultural baggage), but they have actually cut it off from their roots' (Dal Lago, 2006: 77). The physical distance of foreigners, placed in the common imagery in remote lands, becomes the equivalent of social distance: the alien is placed on the margins of society and becomes extraneous.

The members of a migrating society depend, in a particularly close way, on each other, the common interests have the form of momentary and cover individual differences with the specific energy of the present, which so often triumphs over what is objectively more essential. The integration of the individual takes place on the basis of the instability characterizing the migration. Simmel also analyzes the temporal aspect of the duration of relationships, as in the case of travel knowledge. This often develops an intimacy and a degree of openness which would not be justified by its content. This specificity is linked to three reasons: the detachment from the habitual environment, the commonality of momentary impressions and events, the awareness of the next and definitive separation.

In Cotesta's opinion (2002), attitudes and strategies towards immigrants and, more generally, towards the foreigner, have a strong relationship with our social and cultural structure.

In more general terms, the attitude towards the foreigner depends on the way the social groups and the individuals feel and are part of the community. The sense of security or fear of the other is an expression of the trust that a community has in itself. If you believe in your ability to integrate other individuals into your own interior, you have an attitude of openness towards the foreigner, then you will not fear their culture. In the end, the members of such community are convinced that the encounter with the other is not overwhelming; on the contrary, they think that we can build a more interesting cultural perspective from other cultures contribution. But there are also cases in which the well-integrated community structure becomes the basis and the specific means to keep newcomers at the margins of society. However, if communities and social groups are deprived of self-confidence and their ability to integrate new people into their own interior, then they will take on attitudes generally hostile to the foreigner, considering it a potential danger to the survival of one's collective identity. Hence the propensity for hostile measures against immigrants and, more generally, towards the foreigner.

Since, as far as its roots are concerned, 'the foreigner is not tied to individual members or to partial tendencies of the group, he faces them with the particular attitude of those who are 'objective'; this does not mean only detachment or lack of participation, but it is the result of the combination of closeness and distance, indifference and involvement' (Simmel, 1908 quoted in Tabboni, 1990: 149). Its social form is outlined '[...] Starting from the interaction between it and the host community, which gives rise to a system of social relations conditioned by the particular position that the foreigner holds in the social space and that [...] assumes the role of metaphor of the relationship between People' (Simmel, 1908).

Every time an individual interacts with the community, he/she triggers the mechanisms of integration or exclusion, belonging or marginalization, of proximity or distance.

The foreigner has an 'objectivity' in relation to the local community that the latter does not possess. Its fundamental characteristic is the one of not belonging to a certain social circle since the beginning and therefore from the fact of entering in such circle qualities and features which are not peculiar to it. The sociological form of the foreigner is therefore characterized, simultaneously, both from extreme distance and from extreme proximity to the social circle of arrival; in one word from the fact that the 'distant subject is close', where his being close is indicated by the current membership of the group of those who are not foreign (Pollini, Scidà, 2002).

Simmel thus underlined the ambivalent and at the same time provocative character of this figure which by embodying that one synthesis of closeness and distance, is able to stand out in the midst of all the divisions and confrontations commonly accepted and which the entire social order consists of.

It is to be understood if his thought is present in a historical period characterized by incessant migratory processes daily flocking to the European coasts.

3. Topicality of his thought

For a better understanding of Simmel's sociology, three fundamental points have to be taken into consideration: the object of sociology, the sociological method and the relationship between individuals and society. Sociology must study society as a social form, so to Simmel this is a formal science interested in forms that take on relationships in different eras and contexts.

With Simmel's way of proceeding, a new terrain opens up for sociology, that is to analyze things as scientific objects.

In a constantly changing society the national-State perspective is now misplaced, the encroachment of the temporal space dimensions and social action requires a more international vision and interdependence between local and global level. The concept of border assumes a new value not only territorial but also social and cultural, in this sense the mobility of the borders becomes the prerequisite for the construction of social interactions in continuous construction and experimentation. Hence a new vision of the other, in which the sense of trespassing of traditional values and the consequent creation of new individuality is strong.

We need to start from the question of the research of the present work, that is to understand the foreigner as a sociological category that wants to explore both the social construction of the figure of the foreigner itself and the relationships that this figure weaves with an integrated group which it comes in contact with. The definition of foreigner alludes above all to a declaration of difference on the part of the group of arrival, a report, therefore, asymmetrical, as it takes place in the space, on the territory, of the group. The first figure placed by Simmel as the basis of the reflection on the foreigner, is that there is no foreigner without a society, a group, who recognizes himself as such and who feels the newcomer as a stranger. The terms of this relationship are often not mutually defined by the actors in the relationship. Being a foreigner is therefore a social and relational condition which analyzed from another angle, an inner one, binds to the concept of extraneous. The power to define the foreigner as such is challenged more firmly by the group of 'autochthonous' who establish the terms of the relation and define their symbolic rightfully boundaries and place. The foreigner certainly has a sense of strangeness, disorientation in the face of the new situation while maintaining a tormented and painful bond with the place of provenance, which in many cases has been abandoned for reasons of pure survival.

Migrations, as noted in the vast majority of the treatises and manuals of sociology, constitute a non-secondary source of social change but also an effect of it.

So in a sociological perspective, the foreigner can be used as a reading key through which understand the defining mechanisms of the reference community.

The optics therefore appears upside down: understanding the common through the different.

As Cotesta claims

in a complex society the foreigner can share the codes in force, for example, in the economics and not in the politics; it can have a good or passable competence in the use of the working technologies, while having an idea and a practice of the social bond not converging with ours. Above all, it can have a different idea of the truth and the constitutive myth of the social and human being. This happens when the religion of the foreigner is different from the one shared and practiced in its new society. Religion, in fact, elaborates and preserves the fundamental images, the most general constitutive myth of a society. The stranger carries his gods with him; they are not worshipped in his new world, but for him they are still worth (2002: 62).

The foreigner finds, in advancing modernity and in the affirmation of the corporate bond on the Community '[...] next to the risk of alienation [...] The possibility of building strong, intimate personal bonds. [...]. Precisely because the Community dimension recedes and emerges the individual and personal dimension, the foreigner can be an opportunity for intimate links chosen by individuals' (Cotesta, 2002: 67).

Interesting is the analysis of Hans K ung the German philosopher and sociologist who has been passionate about the current socio-political scenario believing that there are several functions of identifying an enemy: the first is the defense, frustrations, aggressions and Responsibilities are projected on the other; the second is the resulting stabilization, for the internal cohesion of the group; the third is the polarization i.e. a grouping in order to fight against a common enemy, and finally we have the activation, that is, to induce the action even in its most extreme form. In this negative sense, however, the author sees a glimmer of positivity, it is not said that the images of the enemy are eternal or immutable.

The foreigner as a metaphor of modern and contemporary condition, characterized by constant change: we are all 'foreigners' (for each other) and 'foreign to ourselves'.

The situation of the stranger described by Simmel is the one of the other inside, of a subject who remains culturally far from society (and in particular the majority community) also and right when it is found to be physically close (internal to Socio-economic processes of society). To it 'the permanent outsider we refer to today is not, however, a solitary outsider, but another member of the community or sub-cultural identity forms, i.e. belonging to a group' (Brighenti, 2003: 40). The difficult intercultural coexistence in so many contexts is easier to achieve when it is understood how the cultures are placed in the encounter, all the cultures, not only those from the reception.

The native is the one who has always been in a place and tomorrow will stay, and from the point of view of Simmel's sociological 'Apriori' can be characterized by the rarity which he is confronted with, with the stereotyped image that others have, and the Illusory perception of the synthesis between its social being and its private being, as it is placed within one single social circle. Only by accepting to be seen through the stereotyped image that the stranger makes of itself, the native can come to relativize the structures of sense of the micro-cosmos which he lives in, learning to live with the new social and economic dynamics that permeates his Reality (Mele, 2007).

Migratory pathways have different trajectories depending on the geographical distance of the countries of origin, depending on the characteristics of the primary aggregation groups and their influence on the

migrating subjects, and depending on the gender and reasons that have determined it.

Migrants are people with their own history, who come from and are charged with 'other' meanings compared to those characterizing the places where they land.

And if society is a complex of relationships individuals create in their continuous interacting, constituted by reciprocal effects: this complex dynamic flow of relationships reproduces and stabilizes in forms that, on the one hand, allowing the analysis of reciprocal relations and, on the other, are continually challenged by the new and increasingly complex social interactions.

According to Simmel a society exists where more individuals enter a relationship of reciprocal action, the society works socially, for this he is particularly interested in the analysis related to the process of society shaping, including its Spatial configuration, pertaining to the stranger. Trying to understand the forms of reciprocal action of individuals, he explained the importance connected to the need for social actors to fill with different content the plurality of spatial configurations. His definition of space is not something that is experienced, but a way of experience; in a 'Simmelian way' space, is never solely an objective aspect, but it is considered in relation to certain specifically psychic functions and peculiar to its historical configurations, space is an activity of the soul, that is simultaneously a condition and a symbol in relations between men (De Simone, 2010a).

It should also be stressed that at the end of the twentieth century Simmel is still referenced for the theory of roles, conflict, rational choice, research on small groups, symbolic interactionism, behaviorist theory and much more. His legacy appears immense and always current, an ante-litteram scholar who could not create a school in his life 'I know that I will die without spiritual heirs (and that is fine). My inheritance resembles money in cash, which is divided among many heirs, of which everyone invests his share, in a manner consistent with his nature, without being interested in the origin of that inheritance' (Simmel, 1970: 11).

Many of the reflections of the author are strongly criticized throughout his life, at his death they had a remarkable reflection, onto all the American sociology first, and then onto the European one. Starting from the concept of life, which represents a substantial milestone of his reflection, it is known how this conception contributes to define the notion of social change, making it emerge as a hidden legacy that Simmel leaves us in the folds of his writings and in the implications of the revisitation in the nascent sociology.

The conception of social change appears mostly based on the categories created by him – *wechsehwirkung* (interaction) and *vergesellschaftung* (association) – which had a relevant part in the tradition of social sciences.

It can therefore be said that the sociation (*vergesellschaftung*) objectifies the human interrelations in forms and social structures, contributing to consolidate the forms of reciprocity which the society is born from. The various forms of *wechselwirkung* given to contemplate and which crystallize thanks to the *vergesellschaftung* generate as many formations and collective institutions, trigger social processes, establishing mechanisms of operation inside the human collectivities released by the will of individuals.

Life to move forward and possibly to progress needs to be organized, namely to set specific forms enabling it to proceed to the best and rationalize its activity for the purposes of its existence and continuation. For the author 'reality is constituted by a fabric of relationships between life and the forms that it assumes, the relationships he analyzes in his philosophy of life, placing life as the foundation of every possible way to understand the reality is therefore the fundamental intuition which Simmel's sociological analysis moves from. [...] [It is not for Simmel] possible to explain the reality by not moving from the relationship between life and the forms in which it manifests itself' (Mongardini, 1976: LVI-LVII), and for the author life to manifest itself must Condense in a shape (De Simone, 2010b).

It can therefore be said that what is original about his thought is the constant search for the characteristics of modern human society, of the ways and forms in which it is realized and transformed.

The topicality of his thought is also found Weber's words who already appreciated it one hundred years ago 'nearly each of his works actually abounds in new and important thoughts and very fine analysis, and that many of his monographs belong to those texts in which not only the right results, but also the wrong ones contain a large amount of stimuli to an in-depth analysis' (Weber, 1991: 9).

As Bauman has effectively pointed out, 'A Simmel glory has been bestowed posthumously, when the universal experience has been caught up with its ability to penetrate', now that the times have come 'those who in the past were the vices of Simmel have become virtues, and weaknesses have become merits' (2010: 208).

He was an 'eccentric' thinker compared to his own time, an outsider in the intellectual landscape of his time, he turned his interest to areas of research that were neglected, followed an innovative methodological approach whose heuristic value was initially misunderstood and a lot often denied, but perhaps for this reason it was able to leave fruitful lessons for the subsequent epochs, which make it our contemporary (Federici, Picchio, 2013).

The 'classics' have inexhaustible potential in triggering new knowledge. As Calvino points out, 'a classic is a book that is never finished with saying what it has to say' and every rereading of it 'is a discovery reading as the first

one' (1995: 7) in the case of the author it is no surprise, that he is felt today as the most 'contemporary of the classics' of the sociology: intuitions, analysis of dissonance, sensibility, ambivalences in the study of the infinite interweaving of the relationships of daily life.

The relevance of Simmel's thought has been the pivot of the present work that opens up to new arguments, to the increasingly poignant idea that migratory flows should be seen as an opportunity and not as a threat; the hope is that the European and international governments would find solutions and policies of reception that can curb a phenomenon of such great scope.

Ours will never be a perfect world, it is not possible and not even desirable, it can be whatsoever more and more a world where one can live better, or happier, this can be achieved only by an open society (Popper, 1970) a society which, despite its complexity, is ready to step in the Game and would consider first and foremost the countless forms of reciprocity and relationship, especially those with the other, the different, the foreigner.

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