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*The Female Absolute and the Relative Male. The Gender Relations According to Georg Simmel*

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Abstract. *This paper focuses the attention on Simmel's selected writings on women, love and gender relations. This paper is structured as follows. The first section focuses on the image of woman presented by Simmel. Although his arguments sound "old fashioned", he gives a positive evaluation of woman. The second section is devoted to the analysis of the gender relations that has led to woman subordination. The third section analyses Simmel's idea of male-female relationships based on the domination/subordination paradigm. The last section shows how Simmel's work devoted to this topic can drive our researches today.*

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In a passage from *The Relative and the Absolute in the Problem of the Sexes* Georg Simmel writes that the relationship with the man is “the sociological place” of the female “metaphysical being” ([1911a] 1985). Four elements emerge from this statement: a) the woman as an absolute (the female “metaphysical being”); b) gender relations; c) the “sociological place”, namely the forms of such relationship; d) the dual register – philosophical and sociological-psychological – in which Simmel set out his reflections.

This sentence contains the range of the issues addressed by Simmel in his works: the many forms of interaction between subjects (Ruggieri, 2016); social interactions as the basis of society (Bergmann, 2011); the fact that interaction takes on a specific meaning for each person; the interest of Simmel, as noted by Fitzi (2020b: 22; 2020c: 138) and Pyyhtinen (2020), in the social and

cultural issues posed by modernisation (Mongardini, 1976; Oakes, 1984; Mele, 2004) and for the topical issues of interest to public opinion (Thériault, 2020). Moreover, from the quoted sentence emerge the deep i.e., immanent nature, of the phenomena under investigation. Acquiring a «sociological place» means getting an empirically detectable form.

Gender relations, love and the family system and organisation are topics on which mankind has always been reflecting. They are also topics strongly affected by the modernization process. According to Lichtblau (1980) at the beginning of the twentieth century and before WWI “the woman question” dominated cultural discussions in newspapers and intellectual circles<sup>1</sup>.

This paper focuses the attention on some selected writings among the many that Simmel over time dedicated to women, love and gender relations<sup>2</sup>. These writings by Simmel have for a long time been considered minor works, as Coser regretted (1977). Today Simmel is instead considered a gender studies pioneer (Franklin, 1996; Voza, 2003; Antinolfi, 2004; Saltzman, 2006; Holmes, 2007; Lindsey, 2016).

The aim of this paper is twofold. On the one hand, my attempt is to highlight that gender relations, according to Simmel, are a complex issue. Despite the traditional image of woman that also Simmel maintained, he did not understand gender relations as a one-way relation, as shown in the paragraph 3. On the other hand,

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<sup>1</sup> The issues discussed were: women's suffrage, property and legal rights, their contribution to modern society and culture, and also, bodily autonomy and sexual morality.

<sup>2</sup> «Between 1890 and 1918, Simmel wrote fifteen articles on these topics, some of them rather extensive», Dahme, 1988: 412.

my aim is to show the topicality of Simmel on such issues. Taking into account his historical social and cultural context, I am going to highlight those elements which could be of interest nowadays. Therefore, Simmel could be considered an author who still gives profitable ideas concerning the gender relations topic. Then, I am going to search out the roots of Simmel's theory in today's empirically based evidence.

This paper is structured as follows. The first section focuses on the image of woman presented by Simmel. Although his arguments concerning woman sound "old fashioned", male chauvinist and remote from our modern sensibility, on a more careful analysis it emerges that he gives a positive evaluation of woman, as if she were the embodiment of an absolute principle.

The second section is devoted to the analysis of the forms of gender relations. Although Simmel is a 19th-century man, he clearly shows that the gender relations are unequal, disadvantaging woman. She is anchored to her nature, i.e., closely linked to the maternal role. Furthermore, he adds that the gender relations as historically realized are characterized by power difference advantaging males. Simmel reconstructs the subordination of women from the socio-historical point of view. As is customary with him, Simmel's remarks consider both the philosophical, and sociological and psychological points of view.

The third section analyses Simmel's idea of male-female relationships based on the domination/subordination paradigm. In the light of this, it is possible to understand why Simmel considers the woman as a philosophical absolute principle and, at the same time in the most traditional way, an inferior being to man.

Lastly, I am going to show how Simmel's work devoted to this topic can drive our researches today, although contemporary society is quite different from that in which Simmel lived – woman has bettered her social position, families are plural, homosexual love is recognized and accepted and the most varied erotic practices and

sexual behaviours are freed from proscription (Beck, Beck Gernsheim, 1990; Giddens, 1993; Plummer, 2002; Bell, Gill, 1995; Schmidt, Strauß, 1998; Bauman, 2003).

## 1. The Woman as an Absolut

It is only at a first superficial reading of the text devoted to the psychology of women that Simmel seems to be a traditionalist with a closed mind ([1890] 1985). Outlining the characteristics of woman, he describes her as bounded by her nature, firmly tied to her biological and reproductive function which absorbs her completely. This explains her instinctual pattern of behaviour, her not being rational, and consequently “naturally” less disposed to practical life and more prone to passivity. It also explains why she is dependent in the relationship on her man more than he is on her. In the modern society all these characteristics are usually considered as limiting the achievement of life goals which are important to an individual.

But Simmel does not consider the strong anchoring of the human being to nature a *diminutio*. On the contrary, according to him, being firmly tied to one’s nature is a valuable element. It means that the intimate cohesion of woman with nature makes her homogeneous, genuine, unitary, absolute ([1911b] 1985).

Because the woman embodies the relationship with nature thanks to her reproductive function, Simmel seems to share in his essay on the sociology of the family ([1895] 1985) the widespread theories of the time supporting the idea of matriarchy (Bachofen, [1861] 1997). This is not the place to debate the validity of such theories (Davies, 2005). Anyway, Simmel thinks such socio-historical theories give empirical confirmation of his idea that in the past the woman, particularly the mother, was the main figure within the community. Monogamous marriage gained strength as an

institution, in order to weld women and men into a lasting relationship and guarantee greater stability to the offspring ([1895] 1985).

The female character therefore mirrors nature and in so doing anchors mankind to immanent vital principles. Consequently, the female's unshakeable naturalness, the preserving of her own original character, raised the woman from the world immanent realm to a metaphysical principle.

On the contrary, man is distracted from social life, absorbed by the professional sphere, subjected to the growing differentiation of modern society. Therefore, he experiences marriage, as well as love and sex relationships more superficially. He is emotionally less involved in the partnership because his activity requires a more rational behaviour, and the reproductive function is not pivotal in his life as much as for woman (Simmel, [1890] 1985).

Although Simmel's writings devoted to the fair sex are the sample of traditional – not to say reactionary *a là* Weininger (1903) – commonplaces on woman, Simmel valorizes the female figure. Because of her sexuality, she is, as mentioned above, the gender closest to nature, and therefore embodies life. These features are typical of woman and make her independent of man. He is, on the contrary, active and anchored to the real world. It is the reason why man loses the true links to nature becoming a partial being in comparison to women.

Summing up, there are two aspects of Simmel's idea of woman and gender relations. Both of them are, in my opinion, well rooted in German sociology and, more generally, culture.

Firstly, nature has long been considered in traditional German culture a source of life and truth for human beings. The closer one is to nature, the more the human condition enjoys balance and harmony (Moebius, 2021: 121). This approach has been consolidated over time. Preserving nature, environmentally friendly

behaviour and the careful use of natural resources are features of contemporary German culture<sup>3</sup>.

Secondly, the “dialogue” between the human and social sciences, a classical topic in Simmel’s theory, mirrors the continuous exchange between philosophy and sociology. Philosophy offers a theoretical basis to sociology and is also a term of comparison. Sociology acts as a driving force for philosophy in addressing the challenging modern times (Dal Lago, 1994; Mele, 2020; Fornari, 2005).

Concerning the previously mentioned antithesis between female and male features, it refers to the comparison between the true human nature and the artificiality of modern life. It is a *Leitmotiv* of German sociology. The main example to be mentioned is Ferdinand Tönnies. He juxtaposed the *Gemeinschaft* (Community) with the *Gesellschaft* (Society) ([1887] 2019). The *Gemeinschaft* is the only place where, thanks to natural bonds, the human being is truly him/herself and preserves the genuineness of his/her feelings. On the contrary, in the *Gesellschaft* the bonds between people are based on interest, collaboration is occasional and the convergence of activities and cooperation is exploitable.

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<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this is the reason why Germany is a country with a strong green party. Furthermore, from the ecological point of view, Germany has implemented one of the most effective industrial policies among the advanced countries (Huber, 2011: 283ff.; BMWi, 2019; Bundesregierung, 2018). Production is ecologically oriented, following technological and organisational innovations driven by digitalisation (Hildebrandt, Landhäußer, 2017). Also, the public opinion is largely conscious, that lifestyles impact on the environment and consequently more environmentally friendly behaviours and consumption must be adopted (f.i. about eating habits see Rückert-John, 2011: 349-353).

Later Norbert Elias – and first of all J. Wolfgang Goethe in *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774) – will resume this dualism and underline how the contrast between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* (Elias, [1939] 1997) is one of the founding elements of the modern European identity. The term *Zivilisation* designates political, economic, technical and social circumstances and is the outcome of a developmental process. The term *Kultur* refers to the moral, spiritual, artistic and religious aspect, namely the most intimate component of the human being (ibid., part I).

Concerning the “dialogue” between the human and social sciences, it mirrors on the one hand the debate between two principles: transcendence and immanence, fixity and transformation, unity and diversification. On the other hand, these principles express both the female qualities – such as unity and solidity, the vital principle as an absolute value – and the male concreteness, the active modern life that is transient. As Lichtblau (1980) highlights, Simmel, stressing the juxtaposition between the gender principles, aims to understand if the feminine vital principle could contribute to overcoming the narrow borders of modern male oriented culture (ibid: 95-96; Fitzi, 2019).

After discussing how Simmel deals with the female figure as an absolute vital principle, the next section is devoted to gender relations in their empirical manifestations.

## **2. The forms of gender relations**

Simmel defines gender relations as a “sociological place”, as if it were the meeting point between the two partners. Lenz (2018) recalls that in chapter 2 of *Sociology* (2009) entitled *The Number of Members as Determining the Sociological Form of the Group*, Simmel deals with the structural feature of male-female relationships. Analyzing Simmel's reflection on dyads and triads, Nedelmann (1980: 562; 1983) points out that the two-person relationship is the foundation

of every interaction and is a fundamental sociological principle (Ziemann, 2011). In fact, if one quits the couple dissolves (McCall, 1988), whereas, on the contrary, the triad persists.

The starting point to analyse the gender relation, according to Simmel's theory, is his idea of love<sup>4</sup>. This feeling makes it possible to establish a relationship between two subjects, and in so doing to overcome the distance between the two partners (Simmel, 1921; Vozza, 2002). Simmel points out that in the couple relationship the subject is involved in all its facets<sup>5</sup>.

Partnership means forming a closed unit to the world outside<sup>6</sup>. Fellmann (2021, chap. 4) points out that eros would consolidate the unity of the partners. This is in accordance with the most recent evolutionary theories. They consider eros functional to the stability of the partnership, because of a very demanding offspring to raise (Kauth, 2007; De la Garza-Mercer, 2007).

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<sup>4</sup> Many times, in his work Simmel emphasizes the importance of feelings, and sociability in particular, as founding elements of society. The social organization is thus endowed with a psychological and emotional foundation. The human being is considered in its totality, both in its intimate and social dimension, a *Leitmotiv* of Simmel's work (Simmel, 1996; Frisby, 2002<sup>2</sup>; Jedlowski, 2010: 159-172; Cantó-Milà, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Simmel underlines the difference in the idea of love between the ancients and the moderns. Love is for Plato based on the contemplation of beauty, for moderns relational and based on reciprocity (Simmel, 1921).

<sup>6</sup> The couple is a unit apart from the outside world. Nevertheless, others can be connected with it, such as matchmakers, any lovers, the children (Fischer 2014). Concerning the last point, many scholars deal with the problem for the couple of finding a new balance after having a baby (Reichle, Werneck, 1999; Moller, Hwang, Wickberg, 2008; Beck Gernsheim, 2008).



Lautmann and Klimke (2018) point out that feelings create bonds, and the uniqueness of the partnership leads to the individualization of love (Simmel, 1921). This means that the partnership deviates from the biological basis of marriage and that the strengthening of the partnership becomes significant (Bauman, 2001, see in particular part III).

The individualization process is pivotal for the partnership. Despite the physical and emotional fusion that love requires, individuality is indispensable within partnership. In fact, respect and discretion among partners are boundaries not to be overcome even in cases of deep intimacy and in sharing daily life. It implies, as Lenz (2018: 272) points out, mutual recognition between partners, also thanks to gestures and rituals (attention, gifts) that strengthen the partnership. In short, the couple is something special because the partners share a highly exclusive degree of intimacy and because it is an autonomous unity separated from the world<sup>7</sup>. At the same time, the partners are two distinct people. If it were not the case, the partnership would not be (Arránz Becker, 2008).

Concerning the empirical evidence, i.e., gender relations in their historical forms, Simmel points out that the women and men tend to experience love in a different way ([1911a] 1985). The woman experiences the partnership in a deep emotional way. All her life is involved and strongly linked to family responsibilities. It is not the case for the man, who experiences it in a less absorbing way.

This gap is the basis of the power imbalances between partners. As seen in paragraph no. 1, Simmel recognizes that the woman, because of her nature, embodies the vital principle. In this sense,

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<sup>7</sup> Simmel anticipates an aspect that will be later developed by Berger and Kellner (1965). They point out that in the love relationship, the couple creates a world of their own in which converge models of behaviour, expectations, and cultural orientations converge.

Simmel recognizes the superiority of the natural female totality in comparison to the rational, efficient, modern male's partiality. Despite this, the male-female relationship is actually dominated by the male.

Simmel reconstructs the steps leading from a community – where the female figure, and particularly the mother with children, is pivotal, and emotional and sexual life of the members is free – to a more firmly structured social organization where the woman is in subordination.

The evolution of marriage and the family has led to the establishment of male power. It is based on economic institutionalized activity and the introduction of private property. The marriage contracts regulating the bride purchase – the woman is an asset considered for her ability to work and her reproductive capacity – led to woman's subordination. However, Simmel adds that whoever acquires the bride as a patrimonial asset appreciates it. It is in the buyer's interest to value the property (woman) acquired and keep her in a good condition ([1895] 1985). However, this does not seem the real condition of women today in the world, where bride purchasing is still going on. Despite being officially banned and condemned by international organizations as a violation of human rights, many very young girls are still involved<sup>8</sup> (Corno *et al.*, 2017).

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<sup>8</sup> According to UNICEF, one fifth of young married women in the world are under 18; in the world every year 12 million girls under 18 get married; over a third of cases in Africa and are in Asia (<https://www.unicef.org/stories/child-marriage-around-world>). Because of the COVID-19 pandemic the situation got worse. UNICEF estimates, by 2030 10 million more girls are at risk of early marriage, due to closed schools, economic difficulties of families and growing poverty (<https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/10-million-additional-girls-risk->

Simmel also notes that man's domination has shaped society in his image ([1911b] 1985). An example is the prevalence of the male point of view and that it is accepted as objective and neutral. Consequently, male criteria are considered universally valid and unduly applied to women. This statement anticipates one of the issues that contemporary feminism has been discussing for years. According to it, the dual articulation of reality should be taken into account and consequently a correct way of speaking and writing respecting gender differences needs to be adopted (Wharton, 2013; Mills, 2008; Menegatti, Rubini, 2017).

Summing up, Simmel values woman as a vital principle because of her natural features. But at the same time, he emphasizes her dependence on man and her state of inferiority with respect to him. Furthermore, he does not see the possibility of change in the direction of empowerment of women, unless the woman is distorted. Despite this, he takes into consideration the possibility that in the future *unmarried* women can access work and professions.

As Klimke and Lautmann (2018) observe, Simmel is ambivalent. Beyond the principles linked to his philosophical approach and his attention to the women's movement at that time, the main feature in Simmel's writings devoted to this topic is a disappointing support for the natural, irreducible disparity in the male-female relationships. This (seeming) contradiction of Simmel's reasoning, is actually a trait of his theory about stratification and social inequalities, as we are going to see in the following paragraph.

### 3. Gender equality according to Simmel

The distinction within social organizations between who is at the top and who is at the bottom, between who is in charge and who is obliged to obey is a topic old as humanity. Hegel addressed it referring to the relation between lordship and servitude (1977: 128-136).

In *Sociology* Simmel systematically deals with the social relationship characterized by the subordination of one of the two partners. He devotes a chapter to the topic of domination and subordination (*Über - und Unterordnung*) (Simmel, 2009, chp. 3; Bianco, 2014). Simmel analyses disparity from an innovative and original perspective for two reasons. *In primis*, he highlights that both partners within the social (unbalanced) relationship have the same importance, even if they hold different “shares” of power. *In secundis*, Simmel makes clear that the dominating partner needs the subordinated one, in order to be in a pre-eminence position. In other words, the subordinated partner plays the role of the *alter-ego*.

Regarding the first aspect, Simmel demonstrates how from a sociological point of view, despite the disparities, the two partners have, actually, the same importance. This means that the dominating partner is not self-sufficient within the social relationship. Consequently, the one who is in a subordinated position is as valuable as the partner who is in a dominating one. According to Simmel, therefore, the “strength” of the weak partner lies in reciprocity. It makes him/her assume an undervalued and far from negligible relevance. In other words, whoever is placed in a condition of subordination and objectively has less power within a relationship is equally valuable, because he/she contributes to the construction of it and plays a role in. This “democratic” idea of sharing within the social relationship is possible thanks to the bond

between the subjects involved in a mutually conditioning interaction.

Regarding the second aspect, the dominating partner needing an *alter ego*, the subordinate one plays a significant role. Without the latter as a term of comparison, the dominating partner cannot test his/her advantageous position, and ability in influencing others. At the same time, the person who is in a subordinated condition, even if weak and subjugated by a power whose strength s/he is unable to counter, nevertheless provides feedback and acts as the counterpart to the one who in a dominating condition. Consequently, the subordinated partner gains in value, because s/he confirms and mirrors the ability of the partner to dominate. This means that the weak partner influences the strong one, despite the fact that the latter has much wider scope to exercise power and ascendancy.

These characteristics are the linchpin of the male-female relationships. Without making it explicit, Simmel refers to the topic of superordination and subordination, when he emphasizes the need for man to be complemented by woman, without respecting the gender difference, i.e., female specificity ([1911a] 1985). This is why, the dominating partner is able to dictate the rules but at the same time, needs the counterpart.

My hypothesis is the following. For Simmel, gender relations are an empirically evidenced form of the unequal relationship that he dealt with in chapter 3 of *Sociology* (2009). This hypothesis is based on two elements.

The first starts from Simmel's observation that biology places women in a double condition. On the one hand, Simmel recognizes the direct participation of women in nature. Therefore, she is pivotal within the partnership because of her own nature. Without her, man, and more generally society, cannot benefit from the anchoring to life that only women can guarantee. On the other hand, due to her biological functions, woman is in a weak condition, depending on man. This double condition affecting woman was considered

ineluctable at that time. In fact, we must remember that the Simmel's historical-cultural environment was different from today and that the natural constraints seemed insurmountable<sup>9</sup>. In this regard, it is arguable, as Klimke and Lautmann (2018: 132) properly point out, that Simmel observes facts without making value judgments.

The second element of my hypothesis is that according to Simmel, the woman within the partnership is undoubtedly in a (social) subordinate position compared to the man. But she constitutes the other pole of the partnership, and as noted above, reciprocity establishes the equal importance of the partners even in an unbalanced power relationship. In other words, reciprocity, rather than the share of power that each holds is the key factor. In this sense, the woman as a member of the partnership, even if in a subordinate position, is equal to the man.

Summing up, on the one hand, Simmel exalts woman as an absolute vital principle. On the other hand, he confines her to a socially subordinate role. In spite of it, he considers her a full member of the partnership. These elements short-circuit each other and illustrate the complexity of Simmel's thought, with its lights and shadows. In my opinion, Simmel's ambiguity arises from these complex passages I have tried to reconstruct and explain. This is, perhaps, the way to overcome the disappointment for his "old-fashioned" statements about woman, and the disorientation due to the contradiction between his theoretical and public positions that

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<sup>9</sup> Simmel testifies to an era in which the female question was still the prerogative of a few ladies in high society and had not yet acquired the clear features of a political claim, nor accumulated that social charge to fully unfold only after World War II. Nevertheless, Simmel thought that women's condition could evolve, as the following generations have witnessed ([1890] 1985).

we would define as progressive and liberal. Simmel's ambivalence and contradictoriness stressed by several authors can be understood by referring to his theory and not forgetting that Simmel thinks as a "technician" of social relations, not as a reformer.

#### **4. Simmel's legacy as a theorist of gender difference**

In this section I am going to take stock of Simmel's legacy today. In contemporary society we experience partnership, love and family life very differently from a century ago. As already noted, Simmel was influenced by his time. Nevertheless, he poses a set of questions of farsighted, while still showing a nineteenth-century sensibility. In any case, some issues debated today can be traced in his work.

Because of the breadth of gender and women studies (Davis, Evans, Lorber, 2006; Smith, 2019), I selected some issues most pertinent to Simmel's theory. A first issue is linked to Simmel's repeated emphasis on the importance of nature, linking it to the female figure. One feminist approach focuses on the relationship between feminism and the environment, albeit with diverging perspectives. A further reflection offered by Simmel is linked to the relevance of woman as the centre of gravity within society. A third interesting aspect of Simmel's writings is his insight into the changing social condition of women based on their position in the labour market.

Concerning the first point – the close relationship between women and nature – this topic has been discussed in the 1970s in feminist contemporary social science circles (Hofmeister, Katz, 2011: 377). According to this orientation, the core thesis is that the exploitation of women and natural resources by established powers – male and capital – go hand in hand (Mies, Shiva, 1993). It is therefore a question of promoting greater respect for women, nature and developing countries. As several theorists highlight, like the German “Bielefeld School”, capitalism takes advantage of a

sexist and racist structure of society (Arbeitsgruppe Bielefelder Entwicklungssoziologen, 1979; Evers, Wallerstein, 1982; Werlhof von, Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1983).

An aspect of ecofeminism significantly connected to Simmel's arguments emphasizes that woman is intimately linked to nature, both because of her biological functions and of the social role deriving from it. Consequently, this feminist approach believes woman is more sensitive and attentive to environmental issues (Warren, 2000).

On the other hand, a second critical approach believes that issue aimed at stressing the woman's natural features and her biological functions, improve the elements that traditionally have confined her to reproductive and care tasks. So, the risk is to anchor woman to the past and to preclude any changes to better her living condition and full social participation. Moreover, such an approach does not allow woman to free choice and empowerment (Shiva, 1988). More recently, it has been emphasized that environmental and social sustainability are closely connected to each other and inextricably linked to gender equality<sup>10</sup>.

The second aspect concerns the centrality of the female figure. In fact, it is only after the Second World War, that the women's liberation movement arises in its full "revolutionary" force. In fact, the "second wave" of feminism in the 1970s was a key element in

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<sup>10</sup> This item is one of the sustainable development goals supported by the UNO. The aim is promoting both environmental sustainability and gender equality. It requires urgent action to promote women empowerment, eliminating the causes of discrimination that still curtail women's rights in private and public spheres (UNICEF, 2020; UNECE, 2012; <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-the-sdgs/sdg-5-gender-equality>).



social transformation, seeking not only equal rights and opportunities but also greater personal freedom for women and democratization particularly within partnership and family life (Goldin, 2006).

Simmel has foreseen in advance what the social sciences would later detect. The participation of women in social and productive life increases wealth (Ferrant, Kolev, 2016). Empirical evidence indicates that in advanced as well as in low-income and emerging countries, the social consideration of women is an element of development and improved quality of life for the whole of society (Bianco, 2019).

The third aspect emerging from Simmel's writings is related to women's participation in the labour market. As noted at the end of section 1, in a passage of the text dedicated to the psychology of women ([1890] 1985), Simmel considers the possibility that in the future women will have access to work and professions. Without glimpsing the trajectory of the coming social change, Simmel takes into consideration the possibility that the economic and professional position of women in society may change. It is interesting to note that he admits this circumstance only for unmarried women, therefore those not destined to become mothers. In other words, according to him the modern woman, by renouncing the expression of her nature, would abdicate her main role and distort herself, assuming – as in fact she will partially assume in contemporary society – features closer to those of man. The consequences of this situation, he adds, will affect her family life.

As a consequence of this, Simmel foresees a differentiation among women. They will be divided into two groups. The ladies of the higher social classes, who can afford to have a life more similar to that of men, will be enabled to act not only in the domestic sphere but become more closely linked to the world of professions and business. The other group is formed by women who carry out the

tasks that nowadays we call “care”, also supporting and helping in integration of those women engaged in extra-domestic activities (Furtado, 2015)<sup>11</sup>.

It seems that Simmel grasped, more than half a century in advance, the extent of the profound change that feminism and the women's movement represented in the second post-war period, starting with Western societies, and all the problems and efforts that today we call the work-life balance (Balbo et al., 1981; Crompton, 2006).

## **Conclusions**

The aim of this paper was to trace in Simmel's theory the roots of issues still debated today, such as gender difference and the link with nature (cf. §4). Therefore, starting from some selected writings among the many that Simmel dedicated over time to women, love and gender relations, I have reconstructed Simmel's thematic and theoretical path.

*First*, I reconstructed the image that Simmel offers of the female figure. Simmel writes on woman in a traditional way and with a sensibility quite remote from today's. He gives a positive evaluation of woman, raising her to the embodiment of a unitary, absolute and immanent principle of life (cf. §1). This valorization of women is due, unlike men, to her biological functions that link the woman closely to nature.

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<sup>11</sup> Simmel seems to foresee, the situation that occurs in many Western families and in particular in countries where welfare services are less efficient. Moreover, the division of labour between women from Western and developing countries today also involves surrogacy (Goodwin, 2010; Bromfield, Rotabi, 2014).

At the same time, however, Simmel points out that the woman is dependent on the man in the partnership (§2). This is due to her nature and the historical social process that shapes the empirically detectable forms of the male-female relationships.

Because the woman is closer to nature, she is far from the rational, efficient and productive world, the male realm. And since the history of humanity has followed a path of rationalization and differentiation, women (and nature) find themselves subjugated by modern culture. This has led to unbalanced gender relations benefiting the man.

Beyond the traditional conception of the woman nurtured by Simmel, as a 19th century man, in his formulation gender relations are more complex than one might think at first sight.

I have tried to reconstruct Simmel's view that the woman is subordinate to the man because of natural and historical-social causes, but at the same time she is equal to him within the partnership. Actually, she shares the social interaction and reciprocity as the other constitutive member of the partnership.

The complexity of Simmel's idea regarding the unbalanced gender relations disadvantaging woman should also be framed in his conception of superordination and subordination. Only in this way can Simmel's contradictions, ambivalence and ambiguity about gender relations detected by many scholars be overcome.

Simmel, like all pioneers, captures some aspects and anticipates them. However, he remains a pre-twentieth century man, faithful to a very traditional idea concerning the male-female relationship<sup>12</sup>. However, he understood, as is the case with good

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<sup>12</sup> Norbert Elias, another German-Jewish sociologist, sharing the same research theme as Simmel, but living a generation later and having lived to the end of the 20th century, shows to be more problematic. Elias speaks of *Machtbalance* (power

sociologists, the extent of the change that the women's movement was heralding and introducing.

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balance) (1986) concerning the male-female relationship (1997, chp. 6). Simmel, on the other hand, still maintains a perspective of interaction between distinct light units, each characterized by well-defined contours.

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