

Systemic Thinking and Intimacy Sociology

—Open Questions on Contemporary Love

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Abstract

Generally, men and women bind themselves driven by what they name love. Creative and identity-renewing exaltation, a revolutionary force that suddenly makes the insipidness of one's life visible, love is a profound emotion. The transition from love to loving, from love as pure emotion to active love in a relationship, marks the difference between yesterday's lovers and today's lovers, over time and in societies, highlighting the social form of intimacy. What, then, is the "form" of contemporary love? Do the risks that characterize today's intimate life mean that love has now become emptied of meaning, sucked into the semantic code of a "light" and "inconsistent" love, as Bauman seems to want? Or is there another interpretative possibility, on the line that runs from Luhmann to Giddens up to Beck? Paradoxically, is it perhaps that love seems to have no meaning because it has "too much" meaning? In the framework of the relationship between *Systems Theory* and *Intimacy Sociology*, the paper addresses these questions, revisiting to this purpose, the morphogenesis of love in the transition from solidarity without choice to solidarity without consent.

Keywords

Complex Social Systems, Intimacy, Love Codification, Modern Contemporary Love

1. Social Form of Love, between Systems Theory and Sociology of Change

Commonly, men and women tie, moved by what they name love. Falling in love, Alberoni (1979) writes, in evident disagreement with psychological and certain philosophical approaches, is not a matter of sexual repression or infantile regression: it is a revolutionary movement, the *nascent state* or an exciting state of ignition of a collective movement made up of two individual, who are directed by

an irreducible change frenzy to a radical revision of their past things for a new community for two. The *nascent state* concept explains the power of this human experience, which is different from other experiences and unique in this diversity rather than in its emotional diversity from individual to individual. Beginning with the effervescence of falling in love, love is a profound emotion. It is the emotion of regeneration, and this emotion is the same in young people and adult people, males and females, homosexuals and heterosexuals, because the structure of the *nascent state* is the same. Transversally to lovers, it is a renewal exaltation of identity, an uncontainable passion that suddenly makes one's life perceived in the sign of insipidity and prompts one to challenge any biographical project already prepared in order to recreate a new, unexpected one; it is surprise and rebirth, the altar on which one feels ready to become victim and priest at the same time, to sacrifice, to stake everything of one's own life even—and too often irresponsibly—one's dearest affections already constructed; it is a driving force of revelation and liberation, that undoes the one's daily life depriving it of all value and rebuilds it on this deprivation of meaning. This is the emotion of love that Alberoni delineates. It is that emotion that does not make so different from us Federico of the Alberighi or Romeo and Juliet, or Anna Karenina, which are models of lovers immortalized by literature of all times.

Different eras, different cultural worlds, among them and between us and them, and yet the overwhelming force of love emotion hoping for a renewed life and enduring everything—oppositions, constraints, waiting, renunciation, loss—is the same. Love defies time, and we cannot deny that this has the strange, surprising effect for us of looking at ourselves into the mirror. As time goes by, love can be disappeared, fade and corroded by time, it can be unrequited, tormented, or desperate. It may become an illusion, a tragic obsession, but the fact always remains that the moment it captivates us, and another with his whole being becomes the full object of our desire, is always an uncontainable emotion, which renews, “colours an experience of someone's inner experience and thus transforms the world as the horizon of inner experience and action” (Luhmann, 1982: p. 25).

The transition from love to loving, from love as pure emotion to active love in relationship, marks the difference between yesterday's lovers and today's lovers, over time and in societies. This is the “social form” of love, its social codification. From this perspective, love by which Dante loves Beatrice or Petrarca loves Laura is certainly not the same love longed for by romantics of the 19th century, nor does the “form” of contemporary love coincide with that of the abstracted and angelic love of Dante's time or with that of modern romantic love even though romantic love too was conceived outside abstractness of Platonic beauty (Simmel, 1921, posthumous publication). Today, love that modernity makes possible is a highly individualized love, lived within the framework of an “infinitely enhanceable individuality” (*cit.*: 141), an individuality in unlimited growth, and a freely recognized and practiced *ars erotica*. And this is a love that is left to itself, to the absolute self-determination of its choices, with unpredictability and instabil-

ity of choice.

Therefore, social codification of love establishes its general profiles, those expectations that allow us to regulate behavioral modalities in intimacy sphere, thus ensuring an “increasing the probability of the improbable” (*cit.*: 9). Luhmann’s *Liebe als Passion* came out in 1982. The thematization of love as a behavioral model, as a generalized meaning orientation, as “model of behavior that could be acted out and which one had in full view before embarking on the search for love” (Luhmann, 1982: p. 20), legitimizes a full-fledged sociological analysis of it, in the intersection between *Systems Theory* and *Sociology of knowledge* on change processes from traditional to modern social systems. *Systems Theory* demonstrates that love

is not a mere anomaly, but indeed a quite normal improbability. Increasing the probability of the improbable—such is the formula that links social theory, evolutionary theory, and a theory of the media of communication. Any normalization of more improbable social structure makes greater demands on the media of communication, which is reflected in their semantics; evolution is the concept that will be used to explain how this phenomenon comes about (Luhmann, *cit.*: 9).

From the systemic perspective, regarding the social system’s formation processes as well as their structural evolution, love is not a question of pure sentiment, or pure emotion, but a semantic order, a symbolic code of communication, “according to the rules of which one can express, form and simulate feelings, deny them, impute them to others” (*cit.*: 20), which informs the structure of intimacy relationships and makes couple system possible as communication process. In fact,

It is the enhancement of the meanings anchored in the code that enables love to be learned, tokens of it to be interpreted and small signs of it to convey deep feelings (*cit.*: 20).

Therefore, it is not emotion or pure feeling but socially standardized semantics of intimacy, *its codification*, “the point from which love can be understood and practiced” (*cit.*: 22).

The issue of *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik* (Luhmann, 1980) continues in *Liebe als Passion*. Through the extension to love of *Generalized Symbolic Medium of Communication*, the connection between *Systems Theory* and *Constructivism* continues. In fact, on the one hand, we learn the function of semantics of love within the framework of the perspective of a systemic thought in which social complexity reduction is central, that is, the recursive “emergence” of social systems through the *meaning selection* and *stabilization* of symbolic codes that make communication possible. On the other hand, the emergence of love codification and an intimate relationship can be considered in the framework of a theoretical connection between evolutionary structural transformation of social systems—from a systemic differentiation by social strata to a functional

one—and a differentiation of that patrimony of semantics ideas—words forms, set phrases, adages and precepts which change their meaning, “pinpoint a specific referent, encapsulate particular experiences and open up new perspectives” (*cit.*: 8)—which act, from time to time, as a condition of communicative possibility and which is a selective result between multiple possibilities of production of meaning by which a society can “ensure the continuity of its reproduction and the adaptation of one action to another” (*cit.*: 8). The starting point is the way in which the Systemic Thinking’s analytic categories (in particular, the *Maturana & Varela’s approach, 1984*)—*circular relationship between cause and effect, principle of evolution by differentiation (variation, selection, stabilization), emerging self-organization, unpredictability, surprise, autopoiesis, operative closure, irreversibility*—reconfigure the system-environment adaptation process, that is redefined as nonlinear circularity process (*structural coupling*) in opposition to the classical science’s systemic categories—system’s stability and input/output relationship predictability. From here, it is understandable why these categories have provided Luhmann’s systemic with the conditions for interpreting our society of modernity. On the one hand, social complexity (in its dimensions of uncertainty, unpredictability, and emergence) is resolved in the recursive dialectic between micro-macro, order and disorder, constraint and possibility, and, on the other hand, in the acceptance of the inevitability of disorder as normality as well as in the acceptance of emergence and unpredictability of order and its forms. And it is understandable why Luhmann has changed the way of conceiving social systems, interpreting them in anti-humanistic terms as communicative systems, emerging and autonomous systems on a structural level (*self-organization*) and operative level (*autopoiesis*), capable of differentiating themselves from environment in response to the disturbing effect of environmental inputs by *autonomously* and *autopoietically* constructing their own boundaries (*operative closure* and *autonomous, self-referential, reproduction*), without losing their own identity. On the one hand, there is the conceptual novelty of a social system (that is, the interactional communicative order—and in this meaning, society as set of all communications that refer to and produce each other) which *emerges* as convergence of meaning or reduction of multiplicity of meaning production possibilities and uncertainty and unpredictability of interactions caused by double contingency in the redundancy of meanings exchanged by *Ego* and *Alter*—psychic systems which are each other’s environment in conditions of interaction. On the other hand, there is a Communication concept that differs from humanistic perspectives and becomes no longer an empathic exchange between the consciousness of two or more participants, between two or more psychic systems (for example, Habermas theory), but rather a *selective process* among different possibilities that ensures the system’s recursive reproduction by understanding pieces of information, which is in a communicative act. Therefore, we can understand why in this perspective, where order (*the system*) is a condition of improbability with respect to normality of disorder that is caused by relation-

ships with external and internal environment—in particular, for social systems, by relationships with the dimension of vital worlds that never completely flattens on structural constraints—the reference to *Systems Theory* makes Luhmann say that love, as an interactional dimension, is a “quite normal improbability” in double contingency conditions (*cit.*: 9). And we can also understand why Luhmann considers *love* as a symbolic medium or symbolic code in the same way as *law, money, truth, values* and *art*. They are all functional *semantic devices* or *generalized symbolic media of communication* (*cit.*: 18), since each in its corresponding sub-system of action is able to make possible and successful an essentially improbable communication, that is, to heighten “receptivity to the communication in such a way that it can be attempted, rather than abandoned as hopeless from the outset” (*cit.*: 18). In other words, love, as well as other *generalized symbolic media of communication*, is “structures”, having the function of increasing the probability of the improbable, ensuring that threshold of improbability of communication is overcome and, that is, that *Alter's* selective meaning offer can be read and accepted by *Ego*. In particular, since a *generalized symbolic medium* is differentiated according to a specific threshold problem, the *love medium* is differentiated according to a specific threshold problem that lies in the fact that intimate communication is highly personalized. So, the *medium of love* or love’s semantic codification makes a *highly personalized communication* possible (*cit.*: 20).

As considered, a sociological analysis of love can find full legitimacy in this Luhmannian reflexion and in the double synergy it postulates. On the one hand, by the *Theory of Generalized Symbolic Medium of Communication*, love passes from pure emotion into a semantic code that overwrites a timeless feeling and from pre-modern to modern redefines the meaning of the same passionate engine of love, which is no longer understood as suspicious and dangerous *madness* deconstructing family assets, as a *disease*, a *folie à deux*, a *miracle* or a *mystery* without *explanation* or *justification*, an incantation *that puts one in chains*, but as a founding and autonomously recognized and self-legitimizing condition of intimacy (*cit.*: 26). On the other hand, in synergy with *Systems Theory*, we can understand love’s systemic function in the forming process of intimate relationships. The differentiation of a special code for love in the intimate sphere is understandable from the perspective of *Systems Theory* in synergy with *Change Theory*. The semantics of love, therefore, can “provide an understanding of the relationship between symbolic media and social structure” (*cit.*: 20). In particular, this synergy makes it possible to relate the condition of validity and use of semantics to a progressive expansion of the contingency sphere and interactional uncertainty which occurs in the shift from a differentiation by social strata to a one of functional differentiation, that is, to a continuous shift of identity reference no longer to a single subsystem—structures such as sex, age, profession, and therefore to position within stratification system—but to a “*personal individual's relationship to the world*” (*cit.*: 21). This is a shift which implies both

the widening of uncertainty about how *the other*, given certain expectations, will behave and the indispensability of a code in order to be able to interpret one's own utterances and the reactions that follow from them:

Self-referential systematization increases in importance in direct proportion to the improbability of communicative success and the uncertain fate of the social relationship (*cit.*: 30).

Therefore,

The more uncertain one is of how the other will adapt to expectations, the more indispensable it becomes to have a system within which one can interpret one's own utterances and the ensuing reactions to them (*cit.*: 30).

From the perspective of this relationship between *System Theory*, *Generalized Symbolic Medium of Communication Theory* and *Change Theory*, the paper traces the morphogenesis of love as a semantic order in the transition from solidarity without choice to solidarity without consent. In this regard, today we are witnessing what might be like a paradox. Experience teaches us that communicating love, weaving an intimate relationship and forming a system is possible. But maintaining an intimate relationship is another matter. The code of contemporary love allows anyone to “play” the “game” of love, but, since it institutionalizes a freedom to love without borders, it places intimate communication facing with risks of its absolutely free management. Therefore, the point is: do risks that characterize today's intimate life mean that love in semantics and in practice has now become emptied of meaning, as Bauman interprets it? Does today's love no longer demand anything from lovers? Or is there another interpretative possibility, along the line that runs from Luhmann to Giddens up to Beck? Paradoxically, is it perhaps that contemporary love seems to have no meaning because it has “too much” meaning?

2. Modernity and Romantic Love: Semantics of Feeling and Reflexivity

The fact according to that the morphogenesis of love corresponds to socio-structural changes is a sociologically acquired fact. In particular, the social recognition of love as a free expression of feeling is a *modern* fact. The progressive de-traditionalization of vital worlds, which is made possible by industrialization process (differentiation of functions and interests, pluralism of values, weakening of transcendent foundations of social solidarity), with the reorganization of family and marital relationships (formation of nuclear families, progressive crumbling of obedience duties to traditional parental and kinship hierarchies and to socio-economic reasons in the constitutions of marriage and family ties), has restructured, on the one hand, the conception of individual by basing this conception on the category of free choice and, on the other hand, the conception of intimate life by basing this on the freedom from those structural restraints—in particular, class restraints—suppressing the reasons of emotions and feelings.

Social and structural reasons for controlling marriage having disappeared, romantic love has raised the problem of intimacy because of its foundations on free choice (Giddens, 1992). The codification of romantic intimacy forges love as mutual sentimental and sexual confidence, as a communion based on sharing of affections and intentions, as psychic communication or meeting of souls which takes the form of a *repair* (Giddens, 1992). This new perspective roots the code of romantic intimacy in a new idea that has individualistic connotations: the idea of research. In fact, the *repair* concept alludes to interpenetration that can be found between the romantic feeling and the idea of an unnegotiable search for an *alter* that confirms and completes one's own identity, repairing and resolving those imperfections, those shortcomings, those voids that a love relationship makes unbearably perceptible for the first time. Within this meaning, the semantics of romantic love institutes a love characterized by the possibility of self-reflexivity for the construction of a common world, that is, a world that is forged by mutual dedication, which cultivates value expectations of authenticity, trust, fidelity, and sharing of intentions. Romantic love becomes an immanent priesthood aimed at reciprocal understanding, acceptance, absolution, redemption and conversion, a discovery and renewal of oneself with *the other* and for *the other*. So love is an open door from the cage of normal everyday life for a reevaluation of one's own world through *the other* and reunites *alter* and *ego* in a new unity of creation.

Modern romantic love finds its foundation in itself, and aspires to narrate of a common biographical project that connects each couple in daily conjugal and family life conceived as the primary goal and final stage of life to strive for. In comparison with today's *convergent love*, this aspect appears to Giddens one of the most discriminating. Although in the cultural framework of romantic ethos feelings and passions have finally been granted to individual, they are still kept under control in their potentially subversive and transgressive nature of social prescriptions and obligations through their association with the idea of marriage and motherhood conceived as the culmination of *the search* and with the idea that true love, once it is found, is *forever* (Giddens, 1992). The union of feeling and sexuality is resolved by binding its realization in the unity of order/institution and freedom, in the context of a free but controlled criterion of choice, in that circuit of generativity and marriage functional to requirements for social stability whose foundations have, however, changed. *Intimization* of marriage is the concept to express that process which now structures its foundations only on love, on a free giving of one's self without reservations and on a nucleus of beliefs and ideals marked by transcendence, idealization of object of love and sublimation of feelings in their being forever, beyond any possible temporal corruption. The codification of *forever* is rooted in the field of aspirations, that is, in the field of aspirations for a long-lasting emotional bond through intrinsic qualities or *elective affinities*, as Goethe named them. Unlike the abstractness of Platonic love, romantic love is an initial ideal of individualized love, for those who choose and for those who are chosen. In *Fragment über die Liebe* (Simmel, 1921,

posthumous publication), Simmel captures the modernity of romantic love in its creative and transformative force of two partners, in its being a dynamic process of reflexive construction of personal identity in relationship with *the other*, experienced as a person, in his/her exclusivity and uniqueness. The semantics of modern romantic love has structured a modality of relationship whose traits are those of transcendence, that is, those of an absolute timelessness capable of challenging the intrinsic everyday life contingency, far from theologisms of any kind and raised to a supra-biological level in nourishing itself with elements which are different from those essential for conservation of the species and only regarding the uniqueness of the individual personality.

The semantic codification of uniqueness in romantic love allows us to reconcile individuality, love and stability of intimacy. Luhmann grasps its function. The reference to uniqueness here serves to give an unreserved trust in self-giving, still implying the idea of a stable core of identity, linked to strong ideals of value and not susceptible to random variability. For Romanticism, uniqueness means dynamic stability (Luhmann, 1982), the possibility of a structured change which functions to contrast that dimension of relational uncertainty that the mystery of *the other* initially presents, giving love a long-lasting confidence. Hence, that semantics of research which gives space to times of knowing *the other* in order to grasp its fundamental characteristics as guarantee of that *forever* towards which romantic intimacy codification makes aspirations converge.

This reference of semantics to individual uniqueness as a principle of choice in love characterizes romantic love which assumes possibilities of autonomous reflexivity on *You* and *I* in relationship, both as lover and loved, in the reciprocity of *Us* and for *Us*. In this way, the form of the romantic codification of intimacy conceives love as *fusionality*, as mutual recognition of the respective world for a particular common world.

Unlike Simmel, Comte, Tönnies, Spencer, Durkheim did not emphasize the romantic intimacy as an autonomous object of study but its functionality with respect to the legitimation of traditional division of labor between sexes and to the consolidation of family institution, focusing on conjugal family as a stable “moral society of solidarity” and basis of social order in its functions of reproduction, transmission of social values, construction of identity, stabilization of adult personality and social integration. And if in Weberian interpretation of modern society the end of domestic community, transformed from a productive unit to a consumption unit, precludes the “disenchantment” of the affective world, still in Parsonsian interpretation the romantic intimacy is filtered through the constitution of a modern nuclear family with the two complementary *expressive* and *instrumental* leaderships.

Starting from the 1970s, much sociological literature insisted on denouncing the harmful impact of consumer society on structuring of personal identity and relational life (e.g. Lasch, 1977; Dizard & Gadlin, 1990). Faced with the general reification of life, consumerist alienation and rising cultural materialism, the

ideal of romantic love seems to be opaque, and substantially weakened in its affective relational contents. Significant anticipations can already be found in the accusation of radical nihilism made by Adorno and Horkheimer (1947) against Western civilization. The reification of man, alienated from his time according to progress-domination-work-consumption logic, and the commodification of relationships, endowed with value only insofar as they satisfy the logic of the utility and exchange, are considered able to empty of meaning feelings, romantic ideals and intimate and marital relationships, subjecting them to the law of a cold utilitarian exchange between supply/demand of care and security. Hochschild's (2003) most current reflexions do not differ from this line of thought, which looks at modern man as subservient to consumption logic (Marcuse, 1964). What emerges is the picture of an advanced modernity which is consolidated on what Hochschild defined as process of commercialization of intimate life, that is, on intrusiveness of the market logic in close relationships—increasingly compliant with the criteria of success, efficiency, calculation and instrumental quantification of every human feeling—which impoverishes the role of romantic affections and ideals in relational life of contemporary man.

Then, today what remains of romantic ideals in couple expectations? Have they completely disappeared from the scene, weakened by the effects that romantic love itself, with its code of choice, has contributed to causing, and shattered under the pressure of female sexual and working emancipation? Are these rhetorical questions? It seems like no. In fact, among interpreters of today's intimate life, the answer to these questions is not univocal. What, then, is the peculiar "form" of contemporary love?

3. Love from Solidarity without Choice to Solidarity without Consent: Love in Modern Contemporary World

The codification of love in our more mature modernity admits the reversibility of choices. Even due to female emancipation, the assumption of free choice and reasons for feeling have implied the unsustainability of a possible *forever* without love, breaking every bond of moral and institutional obligation and favoring an intimacy on reflexive bases starting from recognition of sentimental and sexual negotiability of love relationship. Above all the way of conceiving individuality changes: now its uniqueness is understood as an identity in progress. And the symbolic code of love changes. Every lover wants to freely choose and be chosen for their identity, which is considered not in reference to an ideal of "humanity" linked to strong ideals of value but to real individuality, to one's own individually conceived and updated biographical project as well as continuously open to change, new and unpredictable directions and solutions. This new semantics of individuality as individuality in unlimited growth (Luhmann, 1982), with a uniqueness now understood as *unstable dynamism*, always free to redefine itself, contaminates the semantics of love by problematizing a codification that links the need for intimacy to claims of validity and duration. The symbolization of

love knotted around the recognition of a permitted and protected exclusivity and the denaturalization of marriage and traditional family does not offer sufficient protection against the main danger of intimate relationships: their instability. On the one hand, the code of contemporary love “gives shape” to intimate communication, allows us to speak the language of intimacy and make it readable, making the relationship possible as a communicative process; but, on the other hand, it entrusts its government and maintenance to purely personal resources, with the uncertainty of this situation. Speaking the language of intimacy is possible. As Luhmann says, the customary use of indirect communication, of classic communicative code such as the rapid language of eyes and the symbolization of a function of tacit agreement’ between two different worlds of experiencing and acting belong to contemporary love. And in this respect, the language of contemporary intimacy does not differ from that of romantic love. However, today the register of love is such that keeping it alive and continuous is a very different matter. The form of the current semantic code has transformed love from ideal to problem:

namely, that of being able to find both a partner for an intimate relationship and tie him to it. [...]: The alternative to breaking off the relationship and instead going it alone is taken seriously as a course of action for life [...] individual self-realization is no longer seen in youthful exuberance as a problem of the true love of a lifetime, but as a practical problem encountered as part of adulthood, and one which can be tackled by establishing ties, relinquishing them, and doing without them in the course of a long life (Luhmann, *cit.*: 155).

The autonomization of intimate relationships or *social regression* has created a totally new situation. Now, the stability and involvement with *the other* depend on purely personal resources rather than on social prescriptions. So, conflicts of intimate relationships increase, due to the fact that

personal communication is not only the sole level at which agreement can be preserved in mutual love, but also the only one available for the resolution of differences of opinion with regard to concrete actions, role attitudes, appraisals of environment, causal attributions, questions of taste and value judgements. [...] *one is faced with the question of whether “social regression”, the freedom to shape intimate relationships in accordance with one’s own personal views rather than in terms laid down by society, is not indeed the source of the problems* (*cit.*: 156-157, our italics).

Today, *social regression* and rejection of traditional romantic constraints for voluntary submission and hidden continuation of typical representations of the same tradition in giving importance to a deep and free need for intimacy coexist, although in a difficult balance.

Our contemporary modernity shuffles and confuses cards. It is ambivalent and ambiguous: increasingly the current individuality in unlimited growth in-

tervenes to problematize the meaning opposition criterion as a symbolic device of order and causes uncertainty (for a comparison on these issues from the perspective of the epistemology of complexity see Condorelli, 2019). So, for Luhmann, the problem is the disappearance of those distinctive oppositions, as the plaisir/amour distinction, sincere/insincere, true/false love, able to make informative for love the personal/impersonal difference. And there is an aspect that Luhmann highlights among the sources of uncertainty. Today the myth of a free sexuality is no longer not only a myth but is no longer even scandalous, with the consequence that unlike romantic love the treatment of sexuality no longer suggests very clearly whether or not it is an indicator of love and a guarantee of possible satisfaction of needs for intimate communication. Essentially, now the function of *intersubjective interpenetration* symbolization remains vague. And it is this different intersubjective interpenetration symbolization (in the meaning that everyone makes their own one's complexity available to the other) as well as the absence of traditional constraints placed to guarantee the indissolubility of a couple's intimacy that identifies the main difference between the semantics of contemporary love and that of the modern romantic love. For the above reasons the codification of contemporary intimacy has a lesser integrative capacity compared to the romantic ethos.

This relationship between contemporary love and modern romantic love is open to interpretations that are by no means univocal. Following Luhmann as well as Giddens and Beck, we stay away from the extremes of the Baumanian interpretation, where the contemporary love semantics are such that devalue love and establish an intimacy similar to a game without any rules or meaning. There is a different framework: as previously we said, both rejection and hidden continuation of typical representations of the romantic tradition coexist, albeit their balance is difficult. For Luhmann, the true problem is that today's semantics of love regulate intimate communication going beyond the metaphorical horizon of *fusion*:

Acting out of love, in other words, does not mean conforming, and does not only want to please or to fulfil wishes. The terminology of *submission* and *complaisance* is no longer adequate in this context (Luhmann, *cit.*: 175).

Contemporary love code imposes rules of accreditation of the private and separate world of *the other*. This raises the level of difficulty concerning the overcoming that threshold of improbability that intimate communication finds in itself being a personal communication at the highest level, and to the overcoming of which the possibility of intimate relationships and their maintenance are subordinated. In other words, the contemporary love code makes intimate communication possible but, at the same time, more difficult than ever before: in a time of mature individualism, it's about *finding meaning in the world of someone else* (*cit.*: 175) which today *is* recognized as having the right to be understood by virtue of one's own meaning, of one's own real individuality. Even more: the full acceptance of what *the other* intends to be good for oneself means

running “the risk of winding up not knowing what is good for the other person and *nevertheless* holding on to love (*cit.*: 175), only on to love. In other words, it is about finding meaning in the world of someone else which may not be our own meaning and of finding it—far from a simple complacency—even when we experience its intrinsic unpredictability. From this perspective, *intersubjective interpenetration* can no longer be understood in the romantic meaning as fusion or reciprocity of perspectives but, at the *operational level* (*cit.*: 174), as operative reproduction of *the system* insofar as *ego* has to be open *on principle* to everything that *the other* considers relevant on a personal level. So, today, the more the love codification entrusts it to the care of purely personal resources, the more, for private worlds that project their own infinity onto the total horizon of the world, “playing” the “game” of love means “playing” a “game” that is more challenging than ever, with all the uncertainty and unpredictability of success.

The semantics of contemporary love goes even further than romantic love and nevertheless, and again unlike Bauman, Giddens and especially Beck insist that today’s love appears to retain some fundamental peculiarities of romantic love.

For Giddens (1992), the current symbolic “form” of contemporary love is that of a *convergent love*, an active love that modulates the expectations of intimate life in reference to an unstable love, far from *forever* and *one and only* of romantic love revision process. However, it continues to imply the romantic tension towards the free search for a full, mutual sharing and confident and fertile communication. This is that intimate relationships that the current semantics of convergent love establishes as *pure relationship*, connoting not an ideal purity but a relational condition that freely is constituted to the extent in which each partner thinks he will get sexual and emotional-affective benefits from an intimate relationship with *the other* and which remains stable as long as both parties believe they obtain sufficient gratification from their relationship in order to justify its continuity. Therefore, there is an ethical aspect in the institutionalized removal of structural and legal constraints on regulation of intimate relationships. If, on the one hand, the symbolic codification of today’s love exposes it to contingency, on the other hand, this removal works towards a moralization of intimacy. Having set aside the *forever* ideal of which the precariousness is recognised, precisely for this reason the code of contemporary love implies the demand for an unreserved commitment, being the only possibility and condition for the duration of intimate relationship itself. *Convergent love*, that is, adds value to intimacy, grafting the union onto a continuously renewed commitment, and a possibility of free, open and civil dialogue and confrontation.

In this context, the centrality of *ars erotica* is the true element of novelty in contemporary intimacy codification. Today’s sexuality is a *ductile sexuality*, Giddens says, that is, no longer dependent on constraints of reproduction, no longer subordinated to monogamy, marriage, gender stereotypes, preponderance attributed to male sexual experience, and founded on the individual autonomy and an aspect of personality intrinsically linked to self-awareness. Elias (1939) had already grasped this aspect, tracing the coordinates of a path where the intimacy

is increasingly linked to an eros that frees itself from biological justification and becomes constitutive for the formation and continuation of intimate relationships, up to separating conjugality from sexuality. The problem is to grasp the implications for the stability of intimate relationship. And here if, on the one hand, we can agree on certain perspectives (such as Marcuse's) which see in the codification of a sexuality freed from the control and oppression of the bourgeois morality (which confines it to the enclosure of monogamous marriage and subordinates it to generativity) the precondition for more civil, equal and long-lasting relationships between genders, on the other hand this new conception of sexuality has become a possible terrain of conflict and a further factor of fragilization of intimate relationships¹. Giddens insists on this aspect.

And there is another aspect that must be considered. The current changes in the codification of intimate life appear to Giddens revolutionary in a radical way: the new concept of love as a negotiation of interpersonal bonds from equals educates to a democratic behavior in the practice of intimate life with a potentially "subversive" effect in encouraging the exercise of a democratic behavior even in the public sphere. All that coexists with the risks that envelop current intimate relationships, in particular with the increase in gender violence to pressures by female emancipation, and with the difficulty of finding a balance between an unreserved commitment and the risk of suffering even more in the future if intimate relationship ends.

In turn, Beck certainly does not discuss the fact that today's fragility of intimate bonds is the product of developments in the process of functional differentiation and individualization. Yet, Beck looks at the increase in divorces, second marriages and forms of free cohabitation as the sign of a symbolization process that has made love more difficult but also more important than ever before in our lives (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1990). Today, the hope of "love is the new center around which our detraditionaized life revolves" (*cit.*: 3). It is the last remnant of community that modernity has left to individuals now isolated in a society no longer supported by traditional ties.

Even for Beck the today's symbolization of intimate life comes to term with the ambivalence of modernity, with that dark side of freedom that Durkheim had already captured in his *Le Suicide*. Although individualization process is liberating, it implies an individual and social loss of meaning in life. Freer but more alone, modern man lives in an inverted condition compared to that of tra-

¹Giddens accepts the intuition of Foucault (1976) who interprets the emerging discursive explosion around the sphere of sexuality as an attempt at knowledge and control already expressed in modernity by religious and secular institutions for a positive exercise of power by controlling bodies, desires and ways of life. Yet for Giddens the Foucault's theorization reaches a limit in not having sufficiently considered the links between sexuality and romantic love as well as some aspects of modern individualization process on sexual articulation of intimate life. From this perspective, for Giddens the release of sexuality from traditional constraints of reproduction for the material survival of the family institution and community means its progressive transformation into an individual quality, into a characteristic that is always individually malleable and mouldable, that is, into that *ductile sexuality* which appears to him to be the prerequisite for the sexual revolution of recent decades, for the demand of sexual permissiveness extended to contemplate female sexual emancipation as well as male and female homosexuality.

ditional societies, where the plurality of bonds within which the life was articulated limited stringently his possibilities of choice but at the same time offered a stable basis for a solid identity protection, and guarantees against loneliness (here “a person is never alone but integrated in a larger unit” (*cit.*: 46)). For Beck, and this is the key point, there are all conditions for the triggering of a new, current, apparent paradox. On the one hand, the more traditional bonds and life models lose importance and other references of stability are missing, the more the need to give meaning and anchoring to life aspires to couple’s relationship as the last antidote to loneliness and a new foundation for the construction of identity and for inner stability. The hopes for the couple life have progressively amplified. Contemporary love “is religion after religion, the ultimate belief after the end of all faith” (*cit.*: 12), an immanent faith. Without God, priest, family, class, neighbourhood, without strong contents to which to attach the meaning of life, *at least there is still You* (*cit.*: 33), as the post-modern reparation of an existential void that the fraying of traditional ties have left. And “the size of the *You* is inversely proportional to the emotional void which otherwise seems to prevail” (*cit.*: 33).

In short, today we seem to be far from a normalization of indifference and disengagement towards feelings. The *romantic love complex* continues to give meaning to lives of actors who inhabit contemporaneity. The semantics of contemporary love still has some peculiar traits of romantic love. Even for Beck, as for Giddens, it continues to give value to *research*: incessant search for a solid *You* able to complete a torn *Ego* and which is perceived as an opportunity to build one’s own identity in finding, mirroring and completing oneself within *the other*. In short, the quest of *the I* in *the You*. From this perspective, today love code is aimed at satisfying questions of identity and meaning. Faced with pressing meaning questions such as “who am I?”, “why, for what purpose, am I here?”, to which currently we have to respond as a consequence of modernity, the love, identity and meaning that we have to give to our own world are increasingly intertwined. These are the issues previously raised by Bernard and Schlaffer (1981): modernity has become an *empty cosmos*, and in this empty cosmos, in which God is dead and the workplace is no longer a place that gives satisfaction and meaning, it is precisely having another or other people as a point of escape and orientation that allows us to better bear these questions about identity and world meaning. This is the perspective Beck shares: questions about meaning of our life and identity find an answer in that restricted circle of intimate relationships for whose well-being we want to commit ourselves and to which we want to orient our understanding, communication and care *in that small island of civilization in an empty cosmos*, as Bernard and Schlaffer defined it, able to safeguard our lives from being reduced to cold interactions of official days. So, the code of contemporary love continues to model a love that is absolute and more valued than ever, a love that is exaltation, idealization, that does not admit some compromise and is absolutely vital, a necessary counterbalancing to the losses we feel in the way we live (*cit.*: 33). In short, today love is the *fundamen-*

talist belief of our modernity (*cit.*: 12).

Therefore, today “Romanticism has won” (*cit.*: 12), and this is an effect of the individualization process, of that process which is *at the same* time responsible for today’s relational fragility. Even in Beck’s analysis individualization process is shown in all its ambivalence, intertwining into a single destiny desperate need for freedom and an equally desperate need for intimacy:

Individualization may drive men and woman apart, but paradoxically it also pushes them back into one another’s arms. As tradition becomes diluted, the attractions of a close relationship grow. Everything that one has lost is sought in the other God went first, or we displaced him. [...] Even intimacies can be exchanged, fleetingly, as if they were mere handshakes. All this may keep things moving and open up new “possibilities”, but the variety of relationships is no substitute for a stable primary bond which gives one a sense of identity. As studies have shown, both kinds are necessary: a variety of contacts and lasting intimacy (*cit.*: 32-33).

The macro emergence of a code that combines freedom and romantic tradition reverberates on the micro, progressively discovering in the practice the effects of a difficult balance. Now, considering the loosening of structural constraints that in early modernity still ensured stability to intimacy by weakening the importance of love and its free choice in intimate relationships, the current couple life between autonomous individuals, which are looking for love by free choice and are oriented from our modernity towards their own self-realization, towards establishing the rules of their relationship on their own and making a plurality of decisions ever revocable and negotiable, has become impossible:

Love is a *blank* for which the lovers have to fill in: how they actually organize their love-lives and what love means are decisions they must agree on, and these can vary to include different taboos, expectations and infidelities, all left to their own choice (*cit.*: 192, *our italics*).

Parallel to this *radical form of self-government*, as Beck defines it (*cit.*: 194), the clashes of twentieth century explode in all kinds of households, before, during or after marriage (*cit.*: 24). The outcome of negotiability is neither predetermined nor predeterminable. The possibilities are all open and no one knows what will happen.

In other terms, today a great load of uncertainty weighs on tomorrow. So, in everyday life, love can be “weighed down by expectations and frustrations”, promising and conflicting at the same time, it can be “pleasure, trust, affection, and equally their opposites—boredom, anger, habit, treason, loneliness, intimidation, despair” (*cit.*: 12), hope and betrayal, jealousy and longing, a “battle-ground for recrimination and attempts to escape” (*cit.*: 2), a place of heavy silences, loneliness and mutual misunderstandings, profound and irresolvable conflicts, struggles for one’s own self-realization for which couple life has become a theater for both partners. Conflicts grow and unfold in a myriad of forms

and ways. This is what Beck has defined the “*normal* chaos of love” (*cit.*: 3 [our italics]), because everyone can usually experience it. For everyone, the hope of a couple life, its longing for a happiness that borders on the dream and is a promise of salvation from the loneliness which arises from the historical fragmentation of community, is intertwined with the fragility of living together; the passionate search for dialogue with *the other* is interwoven with the experience of its frequent failure, stagnation, interruption or total rupture. The fact is that today two individualizations meet, two solitudes, two lacerations, and they have such high expectations that a definitive landing is difficult to find.

From this perspective, what appears to be a paradox of our time can no longer be surprising.

Between hope and disappointment, which are faces of the same codification of love, freed from tradition and individualized, this intertwining of contrasting forces allows us to account for the systematic renewal of that existential seesaw in which contemporary men are committed to starting over again after any possible fall. All mistakes are not able to deter any one “from trying again” (*cit.*: 34). *If not You then some other You* (*cit.*: 12) is the behavioral rule that for Beck characterizes contemporary men.

However, there are also those like Bauman who doubt that the structural differentiation process has strengthened the foundations of a renewed need for intimacy, for a happiness desired and sought after in *the Us*. In the contemporary love semantics the valorization of love and its importance in our lives has undergone an inexorable process of emptying of that even vital essence still recognized in the reconstructive framework proposed by Beck. The metaphor of *liquid modernity* defeats the romantic ethos. Contemporary social liquidity, where meanings, lifestyles, careers, identities have become a project always in progress, continually destined for redefinition, finds a manifestation of excellence precisely in intimate bonds: in the *liquid modernity* in which we live, a *liquid love* fully lives, that is, a codification and practice of love that recognizes an intimacy ever free to be renegotiated (Bauman, 2003). Liquid-modern rationality conceives the *commitment* as a source of oppression and a stable relationship as a sign of dependence and a trap to be avoided. Thus, the void that was left from the dissolution of traditional ties and the impossibility of forming identities anchored to stability of the main integrating social frameworks remains. A culture of the ephemeral and affective disengagement which extends the consumption logic to intimate relationships, transforming what previously was a question of responsibility and moral obligation simply into a matter of *taste*, prevails. The contemporary intimacy that Bauman depicts is made up of men and women that have fragmented identities, who wish to establish intimate relationships but are, at the same time, even more fearful of remaining harnessed by and in stable relationships, fearing tensions, burdens and moral responsibilities that they neither want nor they think they can bear being a ballast limiting the freedom to continually construct and reconstruct one’s identity and establish relationships. Placed in

this panorama today's intimate relationships are embodiments of ambivalence, difficult balances wavering between the sweet dream and the horrible nightmare, without anyone being able to ever say when one transforms into other. So, the social code of *connectivity*, where connection refers to temporary, precarious and above all superficial and replaceable interactions, prevails and has taken the place of the moral obligation. The current semantics of love implies a labile intimacy, flexible and easily revocable relationships, always open to new solutions, to substitutions rather than adjustments, relationships without commitment and without memory. There is no an unreserved commitment, there is no a conceptualization of the intimate relationship as a search, as an opportunity for constructing personal identity, as an antidote to loneliness through the interweaving of an exclusive relationship with *the other*.

Can we abandon all signs of romanticism today? Bauman has no doubts about it. Romanticism has evaporated from our lives. It is just a memory. The semantics of contemporary love empties of meaning love, establishing relationships able to break up without leaving traces of suffering, identity fractures or reasons for resentment. If we know, in fact, that our partner can decide to maintain a *cool* relationship and leave us at any moment, investing one's own feelings in an intimate relationship is a reckless step. Even more, contemporary men adapt to affective loneliness. It's bitter to think as Bauman does that the affective indifference is the mark of our time. It's bitter to think as Bauman that the *adaptation process* to uncertainty and fragility of intimacy, of which the increasingly affective disengagement favored by the codification of contemporary love is a sign, is even an asset, a *resource*, and the sign of the new post-modern maturity condensed in the desire to embrace the *intimate game* with an open heart (Bauman, 2003).

4. Conclusion: Open Questions on Contemporary Love. Is It Perhaps That Today's Love Seems to Have No Meaning Because It Has "Too Much" Meaning?

Reformulating what we said so far, the intimacy Sociology issues intersect with Complexity Epistemology issues. The creativity of social systems in their differentiation process of love semantics and intimate relationships is the creativity of that *unitas multiplex* that Morin uses to equate the complex system idea with the *solidal ring* idea, that is, an intertwining of interdependent relationships that proceeds by *qualitative leaps*, constraints and emergencies, *codetermination relationships* between micro and macro and systems *coessentiality relationships* between order and disorder (Morin, 1977, 2008). It is about that *essential unpredictability* of systems (Prigogine & Stengers, 1979) that function by a part of *noise*, by that unexpected disorder which, on the one hand, disorganizes systems, in an adaptation relationship to external and internal environment to which systems are open and with which they perpetually exchange energy and information (Von Bertalanffy, 1968). On the other hand, systems draw from dis-

order possibilities for life, re-organization, and qualitatively *new* structural changes, without ever canceling the unexpected, the contingency, in an endless and circular game of disorganization and new, emerging, self-organization, with all the load of *unpredictability* and *surprise* connected to emergence. The *arrow of time* (Prigogine & Stengers, 1979; Prigogine, 2010) manifests itself in this way. In certain conditions, it is a place not of degradation but *creation*, of surprising re-composition in order of a disorder now conceived far beyond the mere residuality into which the reductionism of classical science had driven it back by believing in a natural and social world as a static, orderable, predictable and controllable, without mystery and surprises, stable and in harmonious balance world.

These epistemological bases, on which Prigogine has woven the *new alliance* between physical and social sciences, claiming centrality to *the becoming* and *the history*, are those of *Liebe als Passion*. The image of society that Luhmann outlines here is the image of a system in permanent self-production, engaged in a continuous morphogenetic process of complexity reduction, a historical, dynamic, emerging system just like the Prigogine's dissipative structures as well as von Foerster's non-trivial machines. The *selection* and *stabilization* (convergence) of meanings make possible an unlikely communication due to the *double contingency*, and are characterized from time to time as an emerging effect—an unpredictable macro meaning stabilization—in the system's attempt to reduce the infinite multiplicity of meaning possibilities and bring it within a dimension that can be experienced as the expression of an *actualized meaning* for actions. An incessant *circular autopoietic mechanism* of production and reproduction of constituent elements of the social system, that is an incessant circular autopoietic mechanism of communication by communication (Luhmann, 1984), is the operating engine of this process. And precisely, the relevance of increasing social complexity process from the point of view of its symbolic dimension must be considered for its effects on intimate life. This relevance has long been identified by Negri, Ricolfi, and Sciolla (1983: p. 22) in the *transparency* by which it highlights the link between *the macro* of Sociology—growing complexity of *the social system*—and *the micro* of Sociology—complexity of *the actor* and *the decision-making process*. The complexification social process as symbolic differentiation has actualized in social systems a general systemic rule that has been acquired by contemporary epistemology, namely the absence of clear boundaries between hypercomplexity and disorganization: the more complex social organization is, that is, the greater its variety and freedom, the more it is fragile and exposed to contingency. In this framework, the social complexity increases in its dimension of *cultural surplus* as an excess of choice possibilities (objective and perceived choice possibilities) (Rositi, 1980) has transformed disorder into freedom and freedom into disorder, dissipating much of the symbolic social order of *aut.... aut* of early modernity in the dust that second or late modernity has inherited and reorganized on the basis of *et.... et* (Beck, 1986). Thus the dilemmas of freedom explode: on the one hand, the problems of social integration, as a di-

lemma of social unity from differences and of social cohesion in *acentric or polycentric* systems (Petitot, 1977) and, on the other hand, the problems of identity, as a dilemma of the relationship between “differentiation of decision-making processes [...] and unity of biography” (Negri, Ricolfi, & Sciolla, 1983: p. 18). This is the dilemma of modern contemporary actors, who have a weak, unstable, uncertain subjectivity: the more they are free from the bonds woven for them by institutionalized models of a rigid traditional order and happy to have freed themselves from them and finally gain autonomy of choice and possibilities of delineating at *their own*, individual, biographical project, the more they do not know who they are and what they want (also Lasch, 1977). They are alone and insecure, increasingly busy navigating the waves of freedom without a compass capable of setting a course, having to rely only on their own autonomous and personal ability to give meaning to life. Therefore, this is the dilemma of actors who have a *pluralization of own self* and are debating between choice alternatives that are not only multiple but also perceived as irreducible, and incommensurable.

So, faced with a semantics of individuality that establishes subjectivities that, on the one hand, are free to decide and dedicated to a passion for the infinite—as Durkheim said in his *Le Suicide*—as well as, on the other hand, weak and multiple, love suffers this impact. Today, forming a bond and maintaining this bond are separated. The space of reflexivity, granted to intimacy by a semantics that today grants to love an extraordinarily free mandate of self-determination, equates couple life to the functioning of a *non-trivial machine*: it is an unpredictable and indeterminable outcome of a multiplicity of possible and situated self-organization forms that today love relationship can take on, including the possibility of the dissolution of every bond between partners.

At this point, faced with a love that increasingly resembles a flash of lightning, ripping apart the lives of its protagonists and yet just as a flash of lightning goes out and leaves no aftermath, the question affects the meaning of love itself, that is, the importance that today’s intimacy semantics gives to love in our lives. This meaning seems to be lost in an ever-renewable game, without a past and above all without a future, as Bauman outlined its profiles in what today appears to him to be an our inability to love and remain, a reduction of love logic to consumption logic. Hence, we should think about today’s codification of freedom, implying a continuously redefining choice possibilities, as a mechanism for the production of cascading social effects up to the point of influencing the way we conceive and even feel and practice love, generating opposing predispositions and desires—on the one hand, the desire to establish ties and on the other hand, the opposite desire to keep them weak in order to avoid the risk of remaining entangled in a harsh mesh of relationships (Bauman, 2003). From Bauman’s point of view, we ought to think that today’s love fragilization expresses the normalization of the idea that it is not worth investing in feelings, and that in semantics and practice, love is emptied of meaning, devalued in its functions as a stabilizer

of identity and structures of one's vital world codified by romantic love, impoverished in the remnant of a love without rules, *light*, without consistency. Then, from this perspective, the question appears a rhetorical one, with an answer already contained in premises.

However, a different answer is also possible, along the theoretical line that goes from Luhmann to Giddens and Beck. Today's semantics of love, entrusting the intimate life to our management, regulates love in an all too ethical meaning. As Giddens and Beck suggest, the codification of contemporary love has introduced an element of moralization into love relationships, establishing a freely chosen intimacy in search of *the You* to find oneself in *the Us*. And if then, according to Luhmannian analysis, the code is to decentralize oneself, deliver one's self to love and always find meaning in the world of *the other* which is now recognized as unique and endowed with a uniqueness understood as *unstable dynamism*, so that one is infinitely free to redefine oneself, then may not we perhaps believe that love seems to have no meaning because it has "too much" meaning? Can we not think today's love code demands too much from lovers, demanding them only to love? Faced with the risks of a freedom that can become a problem, embitter souls, petrify initial enthusiasm and cause division, can we not think that contemporary love demands too much, going well beyond the search, for sharing in order to surrender to unconditionality of *the other's* accreditation? Is love's fragility a measure of our inadequacy, of our inability to be free, to take a leap forward, in an ethical land too hard to be tilled? Or much more simply, does the difficulty of *remaining* cast a shadow on the "reality" itself of love emotion, forcing us to consider the reasons for a neo-evolutionary approach, which makes it an illusory reality, *deeply embedded* in the architecture and chemistry of human brains and subjected to instances of the reproduction and its developments (Fisher, 2004: p. 1), more than we as sociologists are willing to believe? In short, contemporary love within the relationship between semantics and relational practice questions us, presenting dilemmatic possibilities to our gaze.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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