

MASSIMO CERULO

Towards an emotional sociology of everyday life

1. Introduction



The aim of this brief article is to point out few trends and countertrends that apparently characterize the emotional acting (and then the social acting) of an individual living in the contemporary society. Starting from Simmel's analysis of social acting forms in modernity (Simmel, 1908, 1900), I will

claim that the two poles, between which everyday experience is developed, as underlined by the German sociologist, seem now to be stronger. Between the inescapable need of solitude and individualism and the existential necessity of acknowledgement, of encounters and of relations with the others, it seems indeed that a sort of relevant stiffening is coming out. In other words, the necessary balance for the individual seems to wobble, also because of media and technological process in which the subject seems to become a “murmuring cane”: exposed to the late-modern wind, carrying flashes of techno-science and echoes of traditions, the contemporary individual tries to whisper his discomfort, using several forms of experience in order to spread his emotionality.

My hypothesis then identifies two social poles in which I believe it is possible to grasp the experiential stiffening: on the one hand, forms of what I would call “*social heremitism*”, on the other forms of *forced collective identification*.

In particular, the theme of the ambivalence will be the fil rouge of my analysis. It represents indeed according to me the key entering the folds of the contemporary world (Calabrò, 1997; Nedelmann, 1992). I will try then to show how ambiguity plays a central role in the contemporary interactions and in the social building of reality, attempting in this context to reflect as well on the role played by some of the media in the transmission and construction of the *social emotions*. On this matter, it seems plausible to me to define such an enquiry as an attempt towards an *emotional sociology of everyday-life*, in which the emotional acting is observed and analysed within everyday practices marking our existences in common.

2. “Social Heremitism” and the refusal of physical contact: the *hikikomori*’s case

In the contemporary society an explosion of the ambivalences of the social acting and a multiplication of the logic of trends and countertrends typical of modernity seem to come out. In this context, the social relation in general, and the emotional-sentimental relation in particular, are subjected to relevant changes.

As already Simmel taught, we would like to be free, but at the same time we feel the need to have someone next to us. We would like to be alone, but when we really are, we feel like lost in the dark (Haroche, 2008). Someone, then, tries extreme solution in order to compromise with his own emotional status. This is the case of over a million of young Japanese, that, refusing to adapt to the rules of society concerning their appearances and refusing to consume emotions that they don’t recognize as their own, decide to lock themselves at home and to relate to the exterior world just through the media (Zielenziger, 2007; cf. Furlong, 2008). The enquiry in question sheds some light on the phenomenon called *hikikomori*, a Japanese term, meaning “the confined” or “the pulling away”, identifying those teenagers who has decided to “not live under the sun light anymore”. Withdrawing the rules of the mass-society, of the social window dressing, of the consumption of “commercial” emotions and, most of all, of the constant adequacy to social situations imposed by the context of belonging, they have decided to go back by one step and look at the world only through the windows opened for them by the media.

I would define this process as a sort of “social heremitism” and I believe that it has to be related to the necessity to put our own *emotional capital* at work, that is, to the relation established by anyone with his emotions. No communitarian obligations, no labelling fears. Paradoxically, then, these young Japanese choose to relate to the exterior reality through the virtual reality: personal websites, blogs *in primis*, thanks to the potential social freedom they warrant, are the field within which their emotional capital is shown and, continuously, newly shaped.

The virtual reality, then, becomes the “place” for the manifestation of emotional status, for the sharing of feelings and for the solidarization with the other, free from the fear of receiving an unwanted social label (Granieri, 2005; Castells, 2003; Mayfield, 2003; see also Morcellini, 1997). In such cases, “looking inside yourself”, that is, to deal with your own consciousness and share your emotions with others, seems much easier than in the face-to-face interactions. It becomes possible, in other words, to open the Pandora’s jar of our own emotionality, since the boundaries and the social conventions of other situations are lacking. And this is true, I believe, not only for the Japanese case.

Someone has noticed that in the virtual arena a “tension towards transparency” is manifested (Formenti, 2005, p. 8), since “a communicative interaction open, honest and sincere” takes place (*ibid.*). Others, as the anthropologist of cyberspace Sherry Turkle, arrived to tribute a therapeutic value to the life on the web, since it is a place “within which life is mimed, or really lived, or yet life is verified, tested in order to accept it and in order to dilute the continuous and material brutality and violence” (Ricciardi, 1997, p. XXIII). I would reflect on the concept of narration applied to the web. And I would consider this latter as one of the main places for the manifestation of our own emotions. Place for confessing ourselves, listening, sharing, communicating. Anyway, a *place of narration*. If by narration we mean «the social practice in which two or more people put a story in common» (Jedlowski, 2000, p.66), what internet add to such a definition is, according to me, a free and unbound character for the narrative act. Along the line of the definition previously quoted we could then affirm that, in the late-modern virtual reality, the web narration is *the social practice in which two or more people put a story in common and manifests their own emotional status not giving in to moral or social bounds, if not to the one (purely hypothetical) foreseen by the virtual space*.

Here is the ambivalence I mentioned: if outside internet (lets think to most of the ordinary everyday interactions and to a great amount of tv programs) we often witness to a manipulation of emotions, that easily assume a negative value because of the falsity and great quantity of the transmitted emotions (Turnaturi, 2000), in the virtual spaces mentioned before it is like you could perceive a *reappropriation of your own feeling*. On the one side, then, a sort of emotional drying up caused by the rythms and by the late-modern contingencies, on the other emotions and feelings find new places where to manifest themselves *in toto*. And this would contradict some interpretations that I find too rigid and that seem to be willing to state the emotions’ fading (Bauman, 2003). Nevertheless we shouldn’t forget the other side of the ambivalence. Internet, in fact, certainly allows a continuous space-temporal interaction and a fully free expression, but at the same time it risks to alienate the subject from the “immediate” reality and “googlize it” (De Kerckhove, 2005, p. 41).

3. Commercialization of emotions and emotional capitalism

The media, then, contribute to create emotions, but substantial differences have to be taken into account. If we think about tv, in particular about the talk-show or the entertainment programs with an admitted live public, it seems that during the show the manifested emotions are previously planned: foreseen before manifestation. In order to attend to the program, then, the subject *has* to manifest just *those emotions* foreseen by the authors of the

show (Turnaturi, 2007, 2000). We could talk about a *commercialization of emotions*, as the direct consequence of the commercialization of reality administered by the television media (De Kerckhove, 2005). Or, as Hastings remarks, we could talk about a sort of “cathode orthodoxy” inclining towards an “emotional deviation of reality” (Hastings, 2007). A sharing, however, of emotions build by others. Created as a frame to the mass media situation in which the encounter takes place. Artificial emotions depending on the contingency. “Shock emotions”, with no time for sedimentation (Lacroix, 2001). The individual, then, is no more in contact with his own inwardness – always more resembling a *no man’s land* – but he is in contact with an artificial self shaped by an *emotional theatricalization*, spread in this case by the mentioned television show in order to gain profit.

The instrumental rationality apparently prevailing in the late-modern society seems to have inhibited an “authentic” manifestation of emotions, favouring the one who make *business*, the one “for media”, the one spread in particular by television. Television, then, seems to become a teacher of what emotions manifest in a given social situation.

In this context, as it comes out from some recent enquiries (Illouz, 2007; Hochschild, 2003; Zelizer, 2005), the consumption plays a central role, since it allows the marketing of emotions previously sketched (in the public sphere as well as in the private one). This is the thesis of the “emotional capitalism”, that is in my view the better illustrating the manifestation of emotions in the contemporary time. On this matter, Illouz, one of the main supporters of this thesis, advocates a congruency between the capitalism’s development and the rise of “emotional culture” highly qualified, that suits the dynamics of the consumer society and is fed by the emotions’ rationalization and “commercialization” process: on the one hand, market trends mould interpersonal relations, on the other, the relations themselves are the centre of attention of economy.

The problem is that such an emotional capitalism is inclined to handle the social relations so in depth, that who don’t adapt to its dynamics risks to be cut out. In other words, who doesn’t accept the logics spread mainly by the economics sphere, who doesn’t repress (at least partially) its own emotions for the sake of a “perverse” working ethics, lives the contemporaneity as a stranger (Illouz, 2007, pp.71-72).

Modernity – Simmel *docet* – is ambivalent. Such ambivalence seems to be marking late-modernity as well, but in my opinion something has to be added. The individual, indeed, being the protagonist of the increasing rationalization of the public sphere, according to the psychological model of “communication”, starts to be recognized as emotional subject, leaving sexual and status differences out of consideration, but is compelled to the control of its own emotionality, if not to a real repression of emotions.

Yet not everybody is able to repress himself. I believe that the effort made looking for the balance allowing to go on day after day requires a partial removal from the “authentic” emotional-sentimental side marking the social action and this, following Simmel’s terminology, makes the subject always more intellectualized.

In contrast with what has been recently claimed, according to which « today we feel fulfilled just when we can freely express our emotions [unlike what happened in the “rational modern society”] » (Pecchinenda, 2007, p. 91), I believe that in our late-modernity emotions that make no *business* are banished. It often happens for several reasons (job career *in primis*) that entire zones of our consciousness are left to themselves and deliberately forgotten, choosing a life of surface rather than plunging in the interior abyss and its troubling depth. To make an effort and show commercial emotions, the ones, that is, spread by the media or, according to Illouz, imposed by capitalism, could put our identity out of sight.

This point is according to me relevant. It concerns very closely the everyday-life sociology.

Finally, everyday we live and make experience looking for an interior balance towards a not-too-difficult existence. Towards an acceptable everyday-life with not too many anxieties.

Only few people really break down, thanks to our power of adaptability to society and its stereotypes. In order to reassemble the fragments of our existence we are inclined to homologate to the status quo spread by our circle of belonging. And, since resistance to the social burden of such a labelling can be impossible for a lot of people, we are inclined to repress our own interior emotions (that I would call *positive* emotions, because “authentic”) and to manifest the ones spread at that moment by society (that I would call *negative* emotions, because “false” or “commercial”).

I believe to be able to state that negative emotions, unlike the positive ones, conquer a crucial role in the contemporary society. The late modernity individual is inclined to inhibit *positive* emotions, since hypothetically leading to “social disorder”; meanwhile he or she has to adapt to the *negative* ones, and maybe these are the most influential for the human contemporary behaviours. Not incidentally, already twenty years ago Stearns and Stearns analyzed the american society through an historical perspective and talked about “emotionology” (Stearns et al., 1985), meaning by that an enquiry and a practice of everyday emotions aiming to keep under control the more profound and “authentic” ones, in order to manifest the more suited according to the circumstances. I believe that such a behaviour appears today amplified and strongly marked by ambivalence, since on the one hand indulgency towards hedonistic pleasures seems to increase, on the other the efforts of repression of our own emotions are intensified.

4. *Like a conclusion (and most of all to not conclude)*

My brief remarks intend to spread two main suggestions: first, I would like to convey a different approach to our emotional-sentimental status. It is time to start cultivating a capability to recognize and accept our emotions as they are. Not trying to temper them with for the sake of the late modernity homologation. If we do not learn to “handle them with care” (Turnaturi, 2007), we risk to loose sight of the research of the meaning of our existence representing the target of our everyday actions. The danger is that, not trusting our emotions anymore, we became automata having nothing new to say.

Secondly, I promote the reference to ambivalence as an instrument for the study of the social reality phenomena, in order to avoid the risks of unidirectional conclusions and misunderstandings of the complexity of the social acting. Since, as Simmel keep teaching us, reality is polymorphous. Whatever knowledge we think we have of something, there is always an other perspective through which we could look at it. And rediscover it as we would have never thought it possible.

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