

<http://digithum.uoc.edu>**Book Review****Book review of *Love and Society. Special Social Forms and the Master Emotion* by Swen Seebach****A sociological study of love: Swen Seebach's *Love and Society******By Adriana García-Andrade**Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana
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agarciaaamx@yahoo.com**Date of submission:** January 2018**Published in:** July 2018**RECOMMENDED CITATION**GARCÍA-ANDRADE, Adriana (2018). "Book review of *Love and Society. Special Social Forms and the Master Emotion* by Swen Seebach" [online article]. *Digithum*, no. 22, pp. 1-5. Universitat Oberta de Catalunya and Universidad de Antioquia.<<http://doi.org/10.7238/d.v0i22.3123>>The texts published in this journal are – unless otherwise indicated – covered by the Creative Commons Spain Attribution 4.0 International licence. The full text of the licence can be consulted here: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Love and Society by Swen Seebach is a sociological study of love at its best. In recent years, there has been a global boom in the scientific studies of love (García-Andrade, 2014).

Why? How has love become as crucial in science as it has in our lives? This book intends to understand why and how love has come to be the center stage from a sociological point of view. I also emphasize this is a sociological endeavor because the questions at hand are: What is love's contribution to social cohesion? How do we bond with each other when we are 'in love'? Why is it so central in our societies, contrary to other historical periods?

Also, and different from other theoretical texts, the author goes hand in hand with empirical research on love to illustrate what people say about their love bonds: "[...] nearly 100 qualitative interviews with people from different European countries, with different sexual orientations, and with different social backgrounds [...]" (p. 13, n. 1).

In what follows, I will develop the argument presented by Seebach, including his significant contributions to the field of love studies, and briefly present some critical comments on what could be the blind spots in the arguments developed.

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The book is divided in three parts, each with two chapters and a conclusion. In the first part, named *An Idea of Love*, Seebach reviews different authors that have reflected on love: feminist scholars, psychologists, historians, and sociologists. The list includes Lacan, Butler, Jónasdóttir, Ackerman, Illouz, Hochschild, Kemper, Beck, and Beck-Gernsheim, only to mention some. In his critical reading, he shows love can be analyzed as something that is felt and propels to action, something that is felt towards someone (bond), and it is an institution and ideal because it “makes us believe and gives security about a shared tomorrow...” (p. 31). With these insights, Seebach works to elucidate what love is as a social phenomenon that can include all these facets. In this task, his central theoretical ‘north’ are sociologists Georg Simmel and Niklas Luhmann, informed by Sternberg’s insight about love as passion, intimacy, and commitment. For Seebach, Simmel and Luhmann share theoretical premises as to how society involves *Sinn* (meaning and a way to interpret the world at hand), and how this meanings or communication (in Luhmann’s case) are also socio-historical. For Simmel, society can be seen as a conjunction of forms of sociation, of bonding, of affecting and being affected (*Wirkungswechsel*) between individuals. In the course of history, these mutual affections between individuals have developed into specific forms (stabilized ways of interpreting, of guiding ways to do things, of how to relate to others). Love, for Seebach, and following the late Simmel, is a second-order form (a form of forms). It gives:

[...] meaning to other forms (like intimacy, commitment, and passion), objects, moments (e.g. holiday trips, sunsets, restaurant visits), emotions (e.g. missing someone, feeling happy, sad, abandoned), and relations and institutions (e.g. romantic relationships, long-lasting marriages, affairs) in our individual and social lives. (p. 57)

To say love is a second-order form means that, even though it feels like something unique and personal, it is not an individual phenomenon. It is part of a social structure (if you want to use an old concept) that allows its perdurability beyond the vicissitudes of particular lives.

In the second part, *A Myth of Love*, Seebach clarifies how love as a second-order form came to be a predominant one, and how this is part of a socio-historical process. For the author, love started to have a central place in what sociologists call ‘first modernity’ but only became predominant in the second modernity. And this is so because certain social conditions were needed for this to happen: The existence of what he calls a ‘romantic ethic’ (a discourse fostering individualism and the *self*); “a more equalitarian social structure” where women could have

the right to choose, the possibility of selecting one’s partner freely; “a set of rules about what love is and to whom it applied”; and a developed consumer market where “shared consumption practices [...] becam[e] a central element of love relationships” (p. 138).

In the third part, *An Experience of Love* – the most interesting one for me –, the author goes beyond structuralism to show, in a precise way, how love is a second-order form that is inhabited, practiced, and used to give a feeling of transcendence to our lives. For Seebach, love as a second-order form can be grasped in love rituals and love myths. Myths and rituals sustain each other: “[m]yths without rituals would be forgotten; rituals without myths would become meaningless. Rituals change over time, as do the myths that hold them together [...]” (p. 146).

What are myths of love? We could translate them as ‘social representations’ or the ‘semantics’ of love. What society thinks love is and how this is repeated by each one of us:

[...] love is this uncontrollable feeling. It happened, for example, when I looked in into his eyes. I mean I felt like getting lost [...]. (Elisabet, 38, Barcelona) (p. 31)

But not only that, myths can be created in each love relationship, in the history constructed by the ‘we’, for example, the mythical beginning in some couples: ‘she didn’t plan to go there but, there she was’; ‘I didn’t want to go but they dragged me, it was meant to be’. Each couple has their own myths about the history they have both webbed. As I quoted before, myths need rituals to keep their ‘transcendence’. Seebach presents three types of love rituals: disclosure, disguise, and enchantment. These rituals make love an embodied and meaningful phenomenon on a personal level, and sustain the existence of love as a second-order form. The rituals are of disclosure when one shows to or discovers things about the other (e.g. pleasure ‘spots’, secrets, signs of compromise). Rituals of disguise, or as the author puts it, of “changing clothes”, changing passions, searching for new things with the other or apart from the other. And, finally, enchanting moments that from the outside could be seen as quotidian but that, through the relationship myth, are special moments:

I really like when it is one of these evenings. We have a glass of wine. Then we take the Tarot cards out and ask them about our future. And then we sit together and talk, and I feel so close to him... (Katrin, 26, Berlin) (p. 180)

Love as a myth is not only for people in a relationship. Seebach sustains that love can be seen as a linear story when lived by lovers, or as a cycle by people who are not in love: “a moment between falling in love, being in love, breaking up, and falling in love again” (p. 188). In that sense, love brings purpose and

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meaning to the future for both people in love and not in love 'at the time'.

Now, the big point in Seebach's book is that love is "the moral center of late modern society" (p. 2). Such a bold statement is proposed against Charles Taylor's argument presented in *The Ethics of Authenticity*, where he is trying to elucidate the elements that can help us live and bond together in our contemporary societies. For Taylor, the solution is an ethic of authenticity, based on the self. For Seebach, Taylor "misses the importance of the intimate dimension that allows late modern society to be held together, and thus overlooks that society is not held together by an ethic of authenticity but, rather, by a morality of love" (p. 193). According to Seebach, love morality is shaped in the intertwining of myths and rituals performed in the relationship. In a love relationship, the individuals not only can develop and express themselves, but also generate "values for right and wrong", a shared set of values that apply not only to the lovers themselves but also to the close ones.

In the *Conclusion*, after his positive ending of love as a moral source for contemporary societies, he presents the other pole of love as a second-order form and the negative consequences this entails.¹ Briefly, he points out the connections between capitalism and love: 1) how, sometimes, in this neoliberal economy, we let ourselves to be exploited in order to have resources for our loved ones; 2) the development of a love market² with goods, trips, scenery specially created for lovers, and therapy, self-help books to seek, get, or maintain a love relationship; 3) the inclusion of love morality in the workplace to sustain demands for performance, "engagement and sacrifice that would be almost impossible without the intimate factor" (p. 202).

The downside of love as a second-order form does not stop in its dubious relation with capitalism. As many feminists have argued for years, a difference in power in the relationship can lead to abuse in all shades and colors. Also, and a pressing issue for me, if morality (morality of love) is created with the close ones, the intimate ones, and we are living in societies led by "fear and emergency", economic and geopolitical crises, "those who are bound by a morality of love answer with a stronger defense

of their intimate circle" (p. 203). Morality, in this sense, can easily lead to bigotry, hate, and disgraceful words that even a 'leader' is able to pronounce referring to people not seen as 'loved ones': "Why do we want all these people from Africa here? They're shit-hole countries".³

II

What are the most significant contributions of the book? Some, I have shown while reviewing his text, others I want to emphasize here.

Firstly, after reading many papers and books about love, Seebach's definition of love seems to me the most overarching one yet, and it can be used to differentiate aspects of love in empirical inquiry. Secondly, the connection between macro, meso, and micro levels contributes to the clarification of love as a complex social phenomenon: myths (semantics, cultural representations, objective culture), rituals (an interaction that is embodied and commemorative, the enactment of myths), individual (practices of cultivating the self, remembering, bridging my history with our history).⁴ Seebach's analysis brings to the table the possibility of observing interactions in relationships as various rituals, and with this, a smoother connection between 'structure' and individual practices is achieved (objective culture and subjective culture in Simmel's sense). Thirdly, the author proposes to analyze love as a cycle, and as a linear phenomenon depending on the observer. This has the virtue of including in the study of love people with actual relationships, and people in the search for or outside the stories of love but touched by the possibility of transcendence love brings in our contemporary societies. Fourthly, another achievement is to show how the enactment of the love relationship creates a world of meaning in itself (an idea put forward by Simmel, somehow modified by Luhmann), and how this creates a morality (rules, norms, ways of acting that are prohibited or permitted) that can apply to abstract things, such as 'what means to be faithful', or mundane things, such as which odors or fluids can be shared⁵ with the

1. Recently, feminist and love studies scholars have reflected on the complexity and duality of love as a source for control and as a liberating and enriching human resource. These reflections gave as a result the book: *Feminism and the power of love. Interdisciplinary interventions* (in press), where Anna Jónasdóttir, Ann Ferguson, Renata Grossi, Margaret Toye, Kathy Jones, Olga Sabido, Justyna Sempruch, Silvia Stoller, Lenna Gunnarsson, and myself write on the bright and obscure sides of love.
2. Eva Illouz (1997) has continuously pointed out the expansion of the love market for dates, travels, beauty products, etc.
3. "Trump derides protections for immigrants from 'shithole' countries" *The Washington Post* on line. [Accessed: 26/01/2018] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-attacks-protections-for-immigrants-from-shithole-countries-in-oval-office-meeting/2018/01/11/bfc0725c-f711-11e7-91af-31ac729add94_story.html?utm_term=.6c78e2a13d5e>.
4. Using other terms, Stevy Jackson has pointed out the need to study love within four cross-cutting dimensions: "structure, meaning, practice and subjectivity" (2015, p. 35). An approach that intends to include different analytical levels (semantics, situation, and 'enminded bodies') for the study of love relationships has been developed by García-Andrade and Sabido-Ramos (2018).
5. In a research conducted with undergraduate students, one young woman shared she would conceal from her partner her menstruation (she was in a seven-year relationship) because it is anti-hygienic (Sabido-Ramos and García-Andrade, 2018).

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other. Finally, Seebach's book is filled with analytical suggestions for empirical research that are perfectly illustrated with examples from his interviews.

III

To end this review, I would like to include some of the blind spots I find in Seebach's book. The final purpose is to provoke an amicable discussion to continue building what we can name as love studies.

I would like to start with the delimitation he puts forward for the love relationship: love in a couple (sharing intimacy, passion, and commitment), meaning a relationship where only two people are involved. The arguments for this selection are: 1) it is love in its narrower form, 2) in his interviews "loving two or more partners at the same time" was rarely mentioned as a practice, 3) there is a perfect fit and a synergic effect of this kind of relationship with "other aspects of modern society and its developments" (p. 18). The couples included in the study are not only heterosexual as he acknowledges; in spite of that, this is understated in his oeuvre as a whole (including the definition of love relationship he uses). Both things, sexual orientation and a love relationship that may involve more than two people, are essential matters nowadays. For one thing, love as a discourse, cultural representation, semantics (as you want to call it) is explicitly tied up with heterosexuality. Are heterosexual relationships the same as the ones that do not define themselves like that? Do non-heterosexual relationships follow the same 'myths'? How do they re-shape the heterosexual notion of romantic love? Do they de-construct it? Personally, an important blind spot is not to have shown if there are differences in rituals and myths used and recreated in couples where this variable is included (e.g. diversity in sexual orientation). It would also have been relevant to dig deeper in the declarations of those people who mentioned they loved more than one person at a time, and how they construct a morality of love. Especially because of the synergic effect love (couple's love) has with capitalism, and a heteronormative society – one might add.

In the second place, Seebach acknowledges the centrality of feminist studies about love but, in his view, these studies only see the discursive aspect. For him, feminist scholars see love mainly as a mechanism to reproduce patriarchal societies. He is right about that, for a long time, feminism saw love only as male domination. Nevertheless, not all feminists dismissed love as a positive and unavoidable force in our lives (for women and men), and recently this trend of thought has gained more visibility: bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Anna Jónasdóttir, are some examples of this.

Moreover, even though power is mentioned in the conclusions, it is de-emphasized in the whole book. From the stories he

provides, not even one shows conflict, violence or hierarchies. Maybe the informants showed only the 'happy' parts, but some talked about disappointment, tiredness, boredom and this is also part of a continued love story.

Finally, I think it is excessive to sustain that love morality is the primordial source of bonding in contemporary societies. The problem is, for me, to think about the existence of society through an old functional vision where cohesion is the most important goal to be achieved. Luhmann, with his theoretical proposal, tries to get functionalism out of this conundrum. Society is communication, communication continues in spite of conflict; the conflicts developed in society create more communication (society). That means bonding is not only about solidarity or about loving each other. Bonds can be sustained by envy – as Giraud has brilliantly shown (Giraud, 2003) –, envy has its own rules and values (it has a 'morality'), it links you to your group of reference, near or far away in the social space – in Bourdieu's terms. The idea I am trying to put forward is not against love as a source of morality, even an important one. However, more evidence is needed to say that love is the fundamental source of morality in contemporary societies.

From what has been said, I think it is clear that Seebach's book is an essential source for research, dialogue, and development in the nascent field of love studies.

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