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De-Privatizing Love: A Transnational Dialogue on the Public Dimension of Love in the Socio-Political Sphere

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Abstract

Dominant rationalist and neoliberal frameworks have often privatized love by treating it as an intimate emotion detached from institutions, power, and collective life. This article examines when love becomes publicly consequential as a sociological force. Using an interpretive, cross-cultural, and dialogical approach, it brings into conversation three situated sociological traditions developed in Brazil, Italy, and South Korea. Rather than comparing nation-states as fixed units, the article analyses how different sociological traditions interpret shared public problems through distinct moral vocabularies and institutional contexts. Three public grammars of love emerge: struggles over inequality and ecological justice in Brazil; tensions between expertise and democratic mediation in Italy; and questions of social empathy, hyper-competition, and post-growth transformation in South Korea. Love also appears as an ambivalent force that may generate cohesion or conflict, inclusion or exclusion. The article concludes that de-privatizing love broadens sociological understanding of how emotions shape collective life and demonstrates the analytical value of dialogical engagement between sociological traditions for reconstructing the public meanings of love across different socio-political contexts.

Keywords: love; sociology of emotions; public sphere; social empathy; cross-cultural dialogue; democratic coexistence



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1. Introduction

In recent decades, dominant rationalist and neoliberal frameworks have contributed to the systematic privatization of love, framing it primarily as an intimate, emotional, and individual experience largely disconnected from the analysis of institutions, power, and collective life. Within this perspective, love appears external to the public sphere and therefore marginal to sociological inquiry. Yet a growing body of scholarship in the

sociology of emotions, recognition theory, feminist thought, and critical social theory has challenged this separation, showing that emotions are not residual or merely subjective phenomena, but constitutive dimensions of social relations and public life.

From a sociological perspective, love can be understood not as a spontaneous or purely private feeling, but as a historically situated social practice shaped by norms, moral expectations, institutional arrangements, and power relations. In this sense, love refers not only to intimacy, but also to a relational capacity that illuminates how social bonds are constituted, maintained, and transformed within collective life. As such, it provides a sociological lens through which societies reproduce cohesion, manage conflict, and imagine forms of common life.

Classical and contemporary social theory provides important resources for this reorientation. In dialogue with [Arendt \(1958\)](#), love can be reconsidered through the tension between intimacy and concern for the common world. While Arendt was wary of importing private sentiments directly into politics, her reflections on plurality, responsibility, and worldliness suggest that attachment to a shared world is indispensable for public life. These insights have been further developed within contemporary critical social theory. In particular [Boltanski \(1990\)](#) has shown that collective life cannot be understood solely through interests, procedures, or institutional arrangements, but also depends on forms of relational engagement that exceed the logic of equivalence and on the ordinary capacities through which individuals recognize suffering, respond to vulnerability, and justify concern for others. Similarly, Axel Honneth's theory of recognition ([Honneth 1995](#)) shows that experiences of care, disrespect, and denial are never purely private matters: they generate struggles for dignity, rights, and justice. Love, in this sense, can be approached as one normative foundation of the social bond whose absence or distortion produces exclusion and social suffering.

This reorientation is further strengthened by sociological traditions beyond the Western canon. Latin American sociology has also contributed significantly to de-privatizing love. Rather than treating it solely as romantic attachment, scholars have analysed love in relation to inequality, urban life, collective identities, and resistance to domination. [Koury \(2017\)](#), for example, interprets love in metropolitan contexts as an emotional strategy through which individuals negotiate loneliness, insecurity, and accelerated social rhythms. [Scribano \(2019\)](#), in turn, highlights how emotions and love may also operate as collective energies capable of contesting domination and sustaining solidaristic practices. Within East Asian philosophical and ethical traditions, relational understandings of reality foreground interdependence and mutual responsibility ([Rosemont 2015](#)), providing important conceptual resources for understanding love beyond the private sphere.

Drawing on these diverse traditions, this article examines under which institutional and historical conditions love becomes publicly consequential. Its contribution lies less in proposing a universal theory of love than in advancing a dialogical sociological framework that connects the sociology of emotions, public sociology, and cross-cultural interpretive inquiry through the concept of love as a public relational category. Here love is approached as a relational and moral capacity that intersects with development models, welfare arrangements, institutional configurations, and forms of collective responsibility, thereby shaping social cohesion and conflict, democratic participation, and collective responses to social and ecological crises.

The article brings into dialogue three situated sociological perspectives developed within distinct national and institutional contexts—Brazil, Italy, and South Korea. These perspectives are not presented as personal viewpoints or interview-based accounts, but as analytically grounded positions emerging from broader debates, research traditions, and collective experiences within their respective academic communities.

Rather than proposing a comparative analysis of national societies, the article explores how these different sociological traditions conceptualize the public significance of love through distinct public problems, institutional experiences, and moral vocabularies. Its objective is to reconstruct the public grammars through which love becomes sociologically meaningful in different contexts and to examine what emerges when these grammars are placed in dialogue. The analytical rationale underlying this dialogical approach, together with the epistemological origins of the article and the criteria guiding the selection of the three cases, is discussed in the following section.

Drawing on theoretical reflection and empirically informed insights, the article explores how love operates as a public force in processes of social development and in ecological and relational transformation at both individual and collective levels. Particular attention is devoted to the intersection of social love, emotions, social empathy, and collective action, highlighting their intrinsically ambivalent character: these dynamics may simultaneously generate conflict and cohesion, exclusion and solidarity, resentment and care.

By adopting a transnational sociological perspective, the article addresses contemporary challenges related to the “art of living together,” understood as a practical and normative problem faced by societies marked by inequality, fragmentation, and ecological vulnerability. Its contribution lies less in proposing a universal theory of love than in showing how love becomes sociologically intelligible when examined through different public grammars of care, recognition, empathy, and collective responsibility. The sections that follow explore these dynamics through the Brazilian, Italian, and Korean contexts.

Epistemic Genesis and Interpretive Dialogical Strategy

Sociology has long argued that concepts are historically situated and acquire meaning through the institutional, cultural, and moral contexts in which they are produced and mobilized (Mannheim 1936). This insight is particularly relevant to the study of the public dimensions of love, whose meanings are inseparable from the social relations, institutions, and collective practices through which they are enacted. From this perspective, dialogue is not simply a means of confronting different viewpoints, but an epistemic strategy for reconstructing how distinct sociological traditions interpret a shared analytical problem. Accordingly, the public grammars analyzed in this article are understood not as predefined analytical categories, but as analytical reconstructions emerging from the dialogue between different sociological traditions. Their purpose is not to reconcile these traditions into a single theory, but to clarify the ways in which each makes the public significance of love sociologically intelligible.

The epistemic genesis of the article reflects this methodological choice. It originated within the activities of the International Sociological Association (ISA), following the establishment of the Thematic Group 12 “Social Love and Solidarity” whose research agenda conceptualizes social love as a form of solidarity expressed through actions and relationships that transcend reciprocity and contribute to the flourishing of others, including strangers, future generations, and the more-than-human world (Cataldi and Iorio 2022; Cataldi et al. 2026). Building on this perspective, the present article explores how the public significance of love is interpreted and articulated across different sociological traditions and socio-political contexts through distinct public grammars. It developed through an ongoing dialogue among sociologists from different intellectual traditions and was further elaborated through an international roundtable involving the presidents of the Brazilian, Italian, and South Korean sociological bodies. Rather than speaking on behalf of their national contexts, participants were invited to reconstruct how their respective sociological

traditions conceptualize the public significance of love in relation to the major public challenges characterizing those contexts.

Methodologically, the article adopts a cross-cultural and dialogical approach grounded in interpretive sociology and relational understandings of the social. Following interpretive approaches to social inquiry, the objective is not to test predefined hypotheses or compare variables across cases, but to interpret the meanings through which social phenomena become intelligible within specific historical and institutional contexts (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006). It brings into dialogue three situated sociological traditions in order to explore how a common sociological question—the public significance of love—is articulated through different public problems, moral vocabularies, and institutional experiences (Connell 2007). Brazil, Italy, and South Korea are therefore approached not as objects of comparison, but as historically situated contexts within which distinct public grammars of love become visible. The reconstruction of these public grammars proceeded through an iterative interpretive process that related the contributions presented by the invited scholars to the wider sociological literature from which those contributions emerged, moving recursively between individual interpretations and their broader theoretical traditions (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). Each grammar thus emerges from the interpretive analysis of the contributions presented by the invited scholars together with the broader sociological literature to which those contributions belong, allowing each grammar to be understood as an analytical synthesis of a situated sociological tradition rather than as a description of a national society.

These cases were selected because they illuminate distinct yet interconnected public grammars of love: struggles over inequality, territorial dispossession, and ecological justice in Brazil; tensions between expertise, institutional ambivalence, and democratic mediation in Italy; and questions of social empathy, hyper-competition, democratic mobilization, and post-growth transformation in South Korea. They are not intended as representative cases of broader world regions, nor as exhaustive accounts of national societies. Rather, they are heuristic and contrastive cases, selected because each renders particularly visible a different configuration of the same underlying analytical problem: the conditions under which love acquires public significance. Their analytical value lies not in statistical or geographical representativeness, but in making visible complementary dimensions of this common question, thereby generating insights that would remain less accessible within a single-case analysis.

Taken together, they allow the article to identify convergences, tensions, and discontinuities in how love is conceptualized, politicized, and institutionalized across different socio-political settings. By bringing these situated perspectives into dialogue, the article identifies the conditions under which love assumes different public meanings while remaining a shared relational phenomenon across diverse institutional, cultural, and historical settings.

2. The Socio-Political Role of Love in the Public Sphere

In contemporary sociological debate, growing attention has been devoted to the public significance of emotions and to the ways affective life is embedded in institutions, inequalities, and collective processes (Ahmed 2004; Illouz 2007; Turner and Stets 2005). Within this broader shift, the question is no longer whether love belongs exclusively to the private sphere, but under which social and historical conditions it acquires public relevance. The central issue, therefore, is not simply whether private emotions enter politics, but how the relational category of love becomes publicly consequential through the institutional organization of care, recognition, solidarity, and responsibility, each of which represents a distinct, though interconnected, dimension of collective life (Fraser 2016; Honneth 1995).

In this sense, love can be approached as a socially mediated orientation toward others and toward the common world, expressed through practices of mutual concern, civic commitment, and the willingness to sustain forms of coexistence beyond immediate self-interest (Arendt 1958; Honneth 1995). Rather than standing in opposition to rationality, love often provides the moral energy through which collective life becomes possible, especially where formal institutions alone prove insufficient (Bauman 1993; Boltanski 2011). This perspective also resonates with more recent debates. Papacharissi (2015) argues that publics are increasingly constituted through shared affective experiences rather than through rational deliberation alone, while Tronto (2013) shows that democratic life depends upon the public organization of care rather than its relegation to the private sphere. Similarly, Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) expands the concept of care beyond interpersonal relations, highlighting its ecological and relational dimensions and showing how responsibilities emerge through networks of interdependence. Together, these contributions reinforce the view that love should be understood not as a private sentiment opposed to public life, but as a relational force through which collective coexistence is sustained, negotiated, and transformed.

From a sociological perspective, the public sphere cannot be understood only as a space of interests, procedures, and strategic competition. It is also sustained by affective infrastructures: trust in strangers, willingness to cooperate, recognition of vulnerability, and a sense of obligation toward people with whom one has no intimate ties (Habermas 1989; Sennett 2012). These dimensions are often taken for granted until they erode. When democratic institutions weaken, inequalities widen, or ecological crises intensify, societies discover that legal norms and economic incentives alone cannot generate social cohesion. The reproduction of collective life depends equally on capacities for reciprocity, empathy, and shared responsibility that are historically cultivated and unevenly distributed (Bauman 1993; Scribano 2019; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009).

This implies that love should not be romanticized as an inherently benevolent force. Like all social energies, it is shaped by power relations and institutional contexts. Love may sustain solidaristic publics, but it may also remain privatized, become exclusionary, or be mobilized selectively in favour of one's own family, nation, class, or community (Ahmed 2004; Illouz 2012). Welfare systems, labour markets, and political cultures deeply influence whether caring dispositions are collectivized through public institutions or relegated to households and informal networks (Esping-Andersen 1990; Tronto 2013). The sociological question, therefore, is not whether love exists, but how it is socially organized, who is entitled to receive it, and who is expected to provide it, often invisibly and unequally (Fraser 2016).

Seen in this light, the transcontinental cases examined in this article represent distinct configurations of the public life of love. In Brazil, where colonial legacies, territorial dispossession, and ecological conflicts remain central, love becomes visible through claims for justice, participation, and the defence of communities whose ways of life are marginalized by dominant development models (Koury 2017; Scribano 2019). In Italy, where institutional fragmentation and distrust toward expertise intersect with long traditions of civic mediation, love is linked to responsibility, reflexivity, and the effort to maintain democratic bonds under conditions of uncertainty (Burawoy 2005; Sorice and Viviani 2025). In South Korea, where accelerated modernization and intense competition coexist with strong memories of collective mobilization, love emerges through social empathy and the civic transformation of conflict into cooperation (Han 2012). These contexts differ historically and culturally, yet each shows that love enters the public sphere most clearly when societies confront the limits of purely technocratic, market-based, or individualistic modes of integration.

To analyse the socio-political role of love, then, is to ask how societies hold together, how they respond to suffering, and how they imagine obligations toward strangers. Love becomes sociologically visible not at the margins of public life, but at its very centre (Tronto 2013): wherever recognition is denied, solidarity is demanded, or new forms of collective responsibility must be built.

2.1. Love, Inequality, and Ecological Injustice: The Brazilian Context

In the Brazilian context, the public dimension of love is closely connected to the analysis of contemporary social transformations and, more specifically, to the way inequalities are produced and recomposed at both global and local levels. Inequalities are not understood as accidental outcomes, but as the result of political choices, development models, and specific forms of governance (Castro 2012; Santos 2007).

Globalization, in this perspective, is not only an economic process, but also a political, cultural, and environmental one. Its effects are highly differentiated across territories, social groups, and existing power relations. Crucially, projects presented as ecological transition or sustainable development cannot be treated as universally consensual agendas: indigenous peoples, rural communities and marginalized populations often bear the social and environmental costs of development projects—extractive industries, large infrastructures, and agro-industrial expansion¹—while benefiting the least from them (Castro 2019; Acsehrad 2010, 2020; Randell and Klein 2021; Verstegen and Rorato 2023).

Within this framework, it becomes evident that the most vulnerable populations are often those who suffer most from the consequences of environmental degradation, while being the least responsible for it. This situation reveals a deep social and ecological injustice that poses major challenges for public policies as well as for the social sciences (Martins 2015; Porto 2012).

Ecological issues, therefore, cannot be treated as purely technical or environmental problems. They are profoundly social, as they refer to power relations, development models, and very precise political choices. Thinking about love in the public sphere, in this context, means interrogating the relationship between knowledge, power, and territories. Development policies are always the outcome of compromises, conflicts, and negotiations among actors with divergent interests, and are frequently defined without real participation by local populations, or even against their interests (Castro 2012; Zhouiri and Oliveira 2010).

This produces forms of dispossession that are not only material, concerning land and natural resources, but also symbolic, insofar as local knowledges are disqualified in favour of external forms of expertise. From this perspective, recognizing the value of situated knowledge² is not only an epistemological gesture but also a political one. Social scientists should not claim to speak on behalf of affected communities, but rather accompany and learn from their struggles, acknowledging that knowledge about development, environment and justice is produced collectively within territories and lived experiences.

Love can thus be understood as a form of collective responsibility that entails recognizing lived experiences, valuing situated knowledges, and defending participation and democracy, rather than reproducing dominant discourses on development, modernization, or sustainability.

2.2. Love, Responsibility, and Sociological Reflexivity: The Italian Context

In the Italian context, reflection on the public dimension of love is situated within a broader interrogation of the role of the social sciences in the public sphere and of the responsibility of sociologists in relation to ongoing social transformations. This interrogation has become particularly urgent as Italian sociology navigates its own institutional and cultural positioning: caught between the demands of academic professionalization,

policy relevance, and civic engagement, it must continuously renegotiate its public mandate (Burawoy 2005; Sorice and Viviani 2025).

Sociology today faces a growing tension between a strong social demand for knowledge, expertise, and interpretation, and a widespread distrust toward the social sciences, which are often accused of being ideological, partisan, or socially irrelevant. This tension is not unique to the Italian context (Burawoy 2004), but it takes a particularly acute form there, given the historically fragile institutionalization of sociology as a discipline and its contested position within both the academy and the broader cultural field (Cossu and Bortolini 2017)³.

This tension reflects a broader transformation in the relationship between knowledge, media systems, and democratic publics. Distrust toward the social sciences cannot be reduced to a simple misunderstanding: it is linked to the structural fragmentation of the public sphere and to the increasing demand for immediate and simplified interpretations of complex social phenomena (Benson 2009). The mediatization of public debate has created new pressures on expert knowledge, rewarding speed and clarity over nuance and rewarding confident assertion over methodological caution.

Within this scenario, love can be read as an orientation toward complexity and as a form of responsibility toward social relations. The time of sociological research—characterized by slowness, caution, and methodological reflexivity—stands in tension with the time of media and public debate, which demands rapid, clear, and often simplified positions. This temporal tension is not merely practical but epistemological: it concerns the very conditions under which sociological knowledge can be produced and legitimately communicated. Following Burawoy's (2005) well-known typology, sociology operates simultaneously across different but interconnected arenas: professional sociology, critical sociology, policy sociology, and public sociology. Far from being mutually exclusive, these modalities are constitutively interdependent, and the tensions between them should not be resolved but reflexively inhabited as part of sociological practice itself (Burawoy et al. 2004; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

This raises a concrete problem: how to intervene publicly without betraying the complexity of sociological analysis, and how to make scientific knowledge audible without turning it into a slogan. The risk is twofold—either retreating into professional self-referentiality, or dissolving sociological rigor into communicative effectiveness.

From this perspective, love does not coincide with immediate emotional involvement or with militant positioning. Rather, it refers to a form of responsibility toward understanding social dynamics and their effects on individuals; a responsibility that implies taking seriously both the structural dimensions of social life and the reflexive agency of social actors (Giddens 1990). Sociology has never been neutral in the sense of being indifferent to social issues, but this does not imply collapsing scientific work into immediate political action. The public dimension of love thus takes the form of care for social complexity and of resistance to the kind of simplifications that individualize structural problems and transform them into moral failures: a gesture that is at once epistemic and ethical.

2.3. Love as Social Empathy and Collective Capacity: The Korean Context

In the Korean context, the public dimension of love is articulated primarily through the concept of social empathy, understood as a response to deepening social conflicts (Jang 2019; Yoo and Jang 2019). Traditionally, collective emotional life has been shaped by relational bonds such as *jeong*⁴, a Korean relational concept referring to enduring ties of affection, mutual care, and shared history (Lim 2014). However, processes of modernization and neoliberal competition have progressively privatized emotional life, contributing to increasing social isolation (Han 2012; Chang 2010).

These transformations are particularly visible in generational, gender, and political conflicts. Public and political conversations tend to focus on persuasion rather than attentive and deep listening, making genuine communication difficult. In this context, social empathy emerges as a civic capacity that enables individuals to understand other social groups beyond their own immediate experience and to engage constructively with social conflict (Jang 2019).

In this context, love does not appear as a private feeling, but as a public social capacity. It can transform conflict, resentment, and division into possibilities for dialogue and social cohesion. Transnational cultural practices—such as those related to the Korean Wave⁵ and K-pop fandom—show how emotional engagement can generate affective communities that foster understanding across social and national boundaries (Jin 2016). Love, understood as social empathy, thus becomes a crucial resource for rebuilding trust, social bonds, and coexistence in a society marked by profound tensions.

An important historical root of this public capacity lies in the memory of the Gwangju Uprising⁶ (the May 18 Democratization Movement). In Gwangju, citizens responded to extreme state violence not only with resistance, but also through mutual aid, collective mourning, and civic self-organization. In doing so, they demonstrated that social empathy in Korea has often been forged through shared democratic suffering and solidarity, rather than through cultural familiarity alone (Shin 2017). The enduring memory of Gwangju suggests that empathy becomes a civic attitude when another person's pain is publicly recognized as a matter of justice and democratic responsibility.

Social empathy is therefore not conceived as a spontaneous disposition (Jang 2019). It requires education, reflexivity and the capacity to distance oneself from one's own social position in order to understand structurally different life conditions. In this sense, empathy becomes a civic competence that can sustain more inclusive forms of coexistence in plural and conflictual societies.

3. The Ambivalent Nature of Social Emotions: Conflict, Cohesion, and Social Transformation

A sociological approach to emotions requires moving beyond any romantic, individualistic, or harmonious understanding of love. Emotions are neither purely private states nor spontaneous moral resources detached from social structure. They are socially produced, culturally coded, and politically mediated forms of orientation that shape how individuals perceive injustice, belonging, authority, and obligation (Hochschild 1983; Turner and Stets 2005; Ahmed 2004). For this reason, emotions should not be treated as residual phenomena external to institutional life, but as constitutive dimensions of social order and social change.

From this perspective, emotions are intrinsically ambivalent social forces (Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips 2011). They can stabilize domination as well as nourish resistance, reinforce boundaries as well as create solidarities, generate resentment as well as civic commitment. Love itself may sustain care, trust, and recognition, yet it may also naturalize sacrifice, conceal asymmetrical dependencies, or be mobilized to defend exclusionary communities organized around family, nation, ethnicity, or class. What appears morally positive in one context may reproduce hierarchy in another. The sociological task, therefore, is not to classify emotions as good or bad, but to analyse the conditions under which they become cohesive, conflictual, emancipatory, or regressive (Bauman 1993; Illouz 2012; Jasper 2018).

This ambivalence becomes especially visible in contemporary societies where structural contradictions are increasingly experienced through emotional registers. Processes such as precarization, widening inequality, democratic distrust, territorial dispossession, and crises of social reproduction are often lived not only materially but affectively—as hu-

miliation, abandonment, anxiety, anger, insecurity, or invisibility. Yet these same emotions may also become the basis for collective identification, protest, mutual support, and claims for justice (Bourdieu et al. 1999; Honneth 1995; Collins 2004). Anger can fuel democratic mobilization; grief can generate solidarity; empathy can widen public concern. At the same time, fear and resentment may be channelled toward scapegoating, polarization, and authoritarian closure. Emotions thus mediate the relationship between structural tensions and collective action.

This is why emotions must be analysed through the institutions and communicative environments that organize them. Welfare regimes, labour markets, media systems, political cultures, and digital platforms shape which emotions become publicly legitimate, whose suffering is recognized, and which grievances remain inaudible. Empathy, for example, is never automatically universal: it is often selective, stratified, and conditioned by symbolic proximity. Likewise, resentment may remain privatized and self-destructive, or become collectivized through movements and public narratives. The key sociological question concerns how emotions are channeled, amplified, silenced, and transformed within concrete historical settings (Ahmed 2004; Fraser 2016; Mouffe 2005).

The cases examined in this article illuminate these dynamics through different institutional and historical trajectories. In Brazil, conflicts over development, territory, and ecological injustice show how suffering, indignation, and attachment to land may generate both polarization and collective resistance against unequal models of modernization. In Italy, institutional ambivalence and moral overload reveal how care, frustration, and responsibility are intertwined within welfare systems, professional roles, and fragile public trust. In South Korea, generational, gender, and political tensions demonstrate how anger, empathy, and civic discipline may coexist within democratic mobilizations and highly competitive social environments. Across these settings, emotions do not eliminate conflict; rather, they translate structural contradictions into lived experience and sometimes transform them into new forms of solidarity, participation, and social change.

To analyse the ambivalent nature of social emotions, then, is to recognize that collective life is never governed by interests or norms alone. Societies are also held together—and torn apart—through emotional energies that connect biographies to institutions, grievances to movements, and suffering to political imagination.

3.1. Development, Conflict, and Resistance: The Brazilian Context

In the Brazilian context, the ambivalence of social emotions is clearly visible in conflicts related to development models and social and ecological inequalities. Development processes, often presented as technical and necessary, simultaneously produce expectations of improvement and forms of exclusion. Local populations are frequently confronted with dynamics of dispossession—material and symbolic—linked to land, resources, and the disqualification of local knowledges (Castro 2012; Acselrad 2010; Zhouri and Oliveira 2010).

These experiences generate feelings of injustice, resentment, and contestation, which may translate into open conflict with institutions and dominant actors. At the same time, such emotions also constitute the basis for collective mobilization, resistance, and claim-making. Through these processes, social actors seek to make power asymmetries visible and to affirm recognition of their experiences and knowledges (Martins 2015; Castro 2019).

Ambivalence thus emerges as a central feature of social emotions: emotions express deep structural tensions while also enabling solidarity, collective action, and possibilities for change. In this sense, emotions mediate between conflict and cohesion, opening spaces for social transformation that does not erase conflict, but rather confronts and reworks it.

3.2. Structural Ambivalence and Moral Responsibility: The Italian Context

In the Italian context, ambivalence is explicitly conceptualized as a structural dimension of social and institutional life rather than a merely psychological state. Drawing on Merton and Barber's foundational account, sociological ambivalence refers to the processes through which social structures generate circumstances in which contradictory demands are placed upon the occupants of a given status or role: tensions that are built into institutional arrangements themselves and cannot be resolved at the individual level (Merton and Barber 1963; Merton 1976). In the Italian context, this structural ambivalence permeates professional roles, normative expectations, and organizational life, producing forms of tension that are systemic rather than exceptional. This is particularly evident in the welfare and health-care sectors, where processes of institutional hybridization place professional actors at the intersection of contradictory demands: the principles of autonomy and specialization that define professional identity on the one hand, and the imperatives of managerial control, evaluation, and standardization on the other (Lusardi and Tomelleri 2017, 2018). These tensions are not contingent frictions but structural features of contemporary institutional arrangements, in which professional cultures are continuously reshaped by organizational logics that they can neither fully absorb nor straightforwardly resist (Tomelleri 2017). Social actors are thus routinely caught in positions of normative ambivalence that cannot be resolved at the individual level and that generate both suffering and, potentially, spaces for critical negotiation and adaptation.

This ambivalence generates suffering and moral overload, particularly when individuals are expected to take personal responsibility for problems that are clearly structural in origin. As Bourdieu and his collaborators demonstrated in their collective inquiry into contemporary social suffering, individuals who are denied the means of acquiring a socially dignified existence, or who are poorly adjusted to rapidly changing social conditions, are often among those most exposed to what might be called "ordinary suffering"; suffering that is diffuse, socially produced, and structurally invisible (Bourdieu et al. 1999). The Italian case is particularly illustrative here: under conditions of institutional fragmentation and normative overload, structural problems are frequently reframed as individual failures, producing what might be described as a moralization of structural constraints (Bauman 1991).

Yet ambivalence is not only a source of distress. It also opens spaces for interpretation, negotiation, and resistance. Bauman argued that the postmodern condition could reinstate the morally autonomous subject precisely by returning to the emotions and feelings as sites of moral energy. A recognition that ambivalent experience, far from paralyzing agency, can also sustain it (Bauman 1993). In this sense, ambivalence makes visible the contradictions embedded in institutional arrangements and dominant discourses, rendering them available for critique and transformation.

The emotions accompanying ambivalence (responsibility, frustration, involvement, care) do not merely accompany social action; they mediate the relationship between structural constraints and individual agency (Bauman 2001). They can fuel conflict but also sustain critical adaptation, enabling actors to navigate normative tensions without either complying passively or withdrawing entirely. This emotional dimension of structural ambivalence connects, in the Italian context, to a broader tradition of relational sociology concerned with the interdependencies between the personal and the institutional (Donati 1998).

Recognizing ambivalence does not weaken sociological critique; on the contrary, it strengthens it by making critique more responsive to complexity and more resistant to the individualization of structural problems. To treat suffering as purely personal is to misread its social grammar. Attending to ambivalence, as both a structural condition and

an emotionally inhabited experience, is thus a precondition for sociological analyses that can do justice to the full weight of social life.

3.3. *Emotional Tensions and Civic Transformation: The Korean Context*

In the Korean context, the ambivalence of social emotions is particularly evident in generational, gender, and political conflicts. Emotions such as empathy, pride, and resentment coexist in dynamic tension (Jang 2019). Civic movements often begin with anger in response to injustice or lack of recognition but may evolve toward collective care and solidarity. Recent research shows that emotions also circulate through digital repertoires of contention, where memes, visual symbols, and online narratives help construct injustice frames and sustain collective identification during contentious politics (Chan et al. 2023).

The Candlelight Revolution⁷ of 2016–2017 and the Revolution of Light⁸ of 2025–2026 are prime examples of this process. Public outrage over corruption and the betrayal of democracy led to large-scale, peaceful demonstrations, where anger was balanced by civic restraint, mutual consideration, and commitment to constitutional procedures, culminating in impeachment rulings upheld by the Constitutional Court⁹. These examples demonstrate how resentment and anger can be transformed into democratic energy and civic solidarity when they are organized publicly and expressed in a reflective manner (Shin 2017; Madan and Jang 2025).

This ambivalence also characterizes transnational cultural practices and fandom-based affective communities. Emotional attachment may coexist with critique of inequality or nationalism, transforming emotional engagement into opportunities for reflection and connection. K-pop fandoms and broader *Hallyu* networks¹⁰ often combine consumption, identification, and forms of collective activism, including campaigns around inclusion, mental health, gender equality, or anti-racism (Jin 2016). Empathy does not eliminate conflict; rather, it mediates and reworks it.

When publicly articulated and reflexively understood, emotions—especially empathy—possess transformative potential. They convert individual feelings into civic energy, support dialogue, and contribute to forms of social cohesion that integrate conflict as a constitutive dimension of collective life. In this sense, emotions in Korea are not merely reactions to social tensions, but resources through which democratic publics are continually reconstituted under conditions of rapid social change, competition, and pluralization (Jang 2019).

4. Public Sociology, Responsibility, and Collective Imagination

The legacy of Michael Burawoy has profoundly shaped contemporary sociological debate by reaffirming that sociology is not exhausted by professional specialization or academic self-observation. His call for public sociology re-centred the discipline around a fundamental question: how can sociological knowledge connect structural analysis with the lived experiences of ordinary people and transform private troubles into publicly intelligible issues (Burawoy 2005, 2004). This question has become even more urgent in a historical conjuncture marked by distrust toward expertise, communicative fragmentation, democratic fatigue, and growing inequalities that are often experienced individually while being socially produced.

Public sociology, in this sense, should not be understood simply as sociology disseminated outside universities or translated into accessible language. It is better conceived as a reflexive mode of knowledge production through which sociology enters into dialogue with publics, social actors, institutions, and contested definitions of social problems. Its task is not merely communicative but democratic: to render visible the structural conditions behind suffering, exclusion, and insecurity, while also recognizing the interpretive capacities and practical knowledge already present within civil society (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992;

Burawoy et al. 2004). Public sociology therefore requires reciprocity rather than one-way expertise, and critical engagement rather than technocratic distance.

Today, this project faces two symmetrical risks. On the one hand, sociology may retreat into insulated professionalization, producing internally sophisticated but socially inaudible knowledge. On the other hand, it may adapt too readily to media environments that reward speed, simplification, polarization, and performative certainty. Both tendencies weaken sociology's public vocation. A discipline adequate to contemporary crises must instead cultivate responsibility toward complexity: making visible the links between biographies and institutions, individual distress and structural transformation, emotions and political economy. Such responsibility is simultaneously intellectual, civic, and methodological, because it concerns not only what sociology knows, but how and for whom it knows it (Giddens 1990; Benson 2009).

This responsibility also has an imaginative dimension. Sociology does not only diagnose contradictions; it can widen horizons of possibility by rendering alternatives thinkable. In moments when dominant institutions appear naturalized or inevitable, sociological imagination helps societies recognize that current arrangements are historically contingent and therefore open to change. Public sociology contributes most powerfully when it de-naturalizes inequality, challenges fatalism, and creates languages through which collective futures can be debated (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Burawoy 2005).

A transnational perspective shows that this task assumes different forms across contexts. In Brazil, public sociology is inseparable from debates on development, environmental conflict, territorial justice, and the recognition of plural knowledges historically marginalized by extractivist and colonial legacies. In Italy, it is linked to rebuilding fragile mediations between expertise, democratic publics, and institutions under conditions of distrust, fragmentation, and contested legitimacy of the social sciences (Sorice and Viviani 2025; Martini and Mangone 2024). In South Korea, it is connected to post-growth debates, social empathy, democratic participation, and the search for new forms of coexistence beyond hyper-competition and growth-centred social models. These contexts differ substantially, yet each reveals that public sociology becomes most meaningful when it helps societies interpret crises while imagining more just and sustainable ways of living together.

In this broader sense, the de-privatization of love and the renewal of public sociology converge. Both challenge the separation between emotions and institutions, between personal suffering and collective responsibility, between moral life and political structures. To take love seriously as a sociological category is also to recognize that public life depends not only on rules and interests, but on capacities for care, recognition, empathy, and shared imagination that no democratic society can afford to neglect.

4.1. *Situated Knowledge and Democratic Responsibility: The Brazilian Context*

In the Brazilian context, the public role of sociology is closely linked to the responsibility of making power relations and asymmetries visible in development processes, public policies, and socio-ecological transformations. Knowledge is never neutral or universal; it is always situated, produced within specific historical and social contexts (Castro 2012; Santos 2014).

Sociology is therefore called to critically interrogate dominant discourses on development, modernization, and sustainability, and to avoid naturalizing inequalities or reproducing power hierarchies. This also requires reflexivity regarding researchers' positions, analytical categories, and relationships with social actors, movements, and institutions.

Public sociology, in this sense, contributes to making visible alternatives, resistances, and collective actions emerging within territories. This responsibility is collective rather than individual and depends on the institutional conditions under which research

is produced and disseminated (Burawoy 2005; Martins 2015; Santos 2007). Sociology thus plays a crucial role in strengthening democracy, participation, and recognition of plural knowledges.

4.2. *Tension, Reflexivity, and Plural Publics: The Italian Context*

In the Italian context, reflection on public sociology focuses on the structural tension between scientific rigour, public exposure, and social engagement. Sociology has played an important role in Italian public debate, offering a critical and scientific perspective on the country's social reality—though its centrality in that debate has fluctuated, and it has been supported or opposed by political power at different historical moments (Sorice and Viviani 2025). The discipline responds to a growing demand for interpretation and meaning, while simultaneously facing distrust and delegitimation—a condition rooted in part in a scarce or total lack of cultural legitimization for sociological work, a consequence of a sociology perpetually in crisis and in search of political recognition and influence that has never been fully achieved (Martini and Mangone 2024).

Reference to Burawoy (2005) is not a normative prescription, but an invitation to conceive sociology's relationship with its publics as plural and dialogical. Between the organic public sociologist and a public is a dialogue, a process of mutual education—one that cannot be reduced to media visibility or immediate political positioning. Public sociology requires a strong grounding in professional sociology and rigorous knowledge production, within a field of antagonistic interdependence among the four types of knowledge—professional, critical, policy, and public—while remaining attentive to how social problems are experienced and articulated in public arenas.

Overcoming self-referentiality does not mean abandoning analytical complexity. Burawoy has called for a sociology co-producing a reflexive knowledge informed by critical publics, seeking to overcome the separation of theory and praxis into which academic sociology risks falling (Burawoy 2005; Chesta and Burawoy 2019). Making structural contradictions visible and resisting their translation into individual blame is, in this sense, a political and epistemic act simultaneously. Public sociology thus contributes to a form of collective responsibility grounded in critical understanding and reflexivity—what Bourdieu, cited by Burawoy, described as the task of “denaturalizing and defatalizing the world” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Burawoy 2005).

4.3. *Post-Growth and Sociological Imagination: The Korean Context*

In the Korean context, public sociology takes a particularly explicit form in the post-growth project developed within the Korean Sociological Association, in dialogue with Michael Burawoy's perspective (Burawoy 2005). The crisis of the growth society is interpreted as revealing the structural limits of development models centred on continuous economic expansion, thus opening the need for deeper theoretical and institutional rethinking.

The post-growth paradigm rejects GDP-centred models and promotes orientations toward social well-being, ecological sustainability, and distributive justice. Sociology is thus called not only to critically analyse existing arrangements, but also to contribute to public debate about alternative institutional orientations and value frameworks. Public sociology transforms experiences of precarity, ecological crisis, and vulnerability into public issues, fostering collective understanding of their structural roots (Burawoy 2005; Han 2012).

From this perspective, sociology contributes to reconstructing collective imagination by creating spaces in which societies can debate not only the means, but also the ends of social organization. Post-growth thus becomes both a theoretical framework and a public sociological intervention aimed at expanding democratic debate and imagining more inclusive and solidaristic futures (Jang 2019).

In the Korean debate, reflections on social empathy are increasingly connected with broader discussions about post-growth futures and the limits of development models centred exclusively on economic expansion. This discussion is also increasingly linked to the “dual transformation” of decarbonization and digitalization. From a post-growth perspective, the central question is whether citizens can develop the capabilities—social empathy, deliberative competence, participation in social dialogue, and local cooperative experiments—required to shape these transformations in a socially just manner, rather than accepting them as purely technocratic imperatives. In this sense, overcoming the crisis of the dual transformation depends not only on the shaping of policy, but also on civil society’s capacity to combine ecological responsibility, democratic participation, and new forms of solidarity. Issues such as demographic decline, regional inequalities, labour market dualisation and the crisis of social reproduction are pushing sociologists to rethink the ethical and relational foundations of collective life beyond purely economic indicators (OECD 2024).

5. Conclusions

The transnational dialogue developed in this article suggests that the sociological meaning of love becomes visible precisely when it is analysed across different institutional contexts, development models, and cultural grammars of social relations. Rather than comparing national trajectories, this dialogue shows how the public significance of love assumes different meanings across historically specific configurations of power, institutions, and collective life. As argued throughout the article, these public grammars are analytical reconstructions of situated sociological traditions rather than descriptions of national societies. Love becomes intelligible as a sociological object when it is displaced from the narrow domain of intimacy and understood as part of the normative, political, and institutional organization of collective life.

Across the three public grammars analyzed here, a shared line of continuity emerges: love is not treated as a merely private sentiment, but as a socio-political force that becomes visible precisely where social life is most strained—by inequality, by institutional contradictions, and by fractured forms of coexistence. De-privatizing love, in this sense, does not mean moralizing the public sphere or replacing analysis with sentiment; rather, it means taking seriously that emotions are “fundamental to social relations,” that they traverse power relations, development models, and the very grammar through which public problems are constructed, rendered audible, or silenced. Societies are never reproduced through markets, bureaucracies, laws, and strategic interests alone; they also depend on historically variable practices of care, recognition, reciprocity, empathy, and shared responsibility through which coexistence is sustained, contested, and transformed. In this respect, the article argues for a broader understanding of the public sphere, one that complements institutional and procedural accounts by recognizing the constitutive role of affective and relational infrastructures in democratic collective life.

A first common focus concerns responsibility: in the Brazilian framing, love is inseparable from the demand to recognize situated knowledges and to confront social and ecological injustice produced by political choices and development models; in the Italian framing, love is linked to an ethic of attention to complexity—an insistence that sociology (and, more broadly, public reasoning) must resist simplification and the individualization of structural problems; in the Korean framing, love is articulated as social empathy, grounded in contextual understanding and “deep listening,” as a civic capacity to transform conflict and resentment into dialogue and cohesion. In each case, love appears less as a moral ideal than as a practical orientation through which societies negotiate vulnerability, recognition, and obligations toward others.

At the same time, some discontinuities mark the transnational picture and sharpen its analytical potential. The Brazilian public grammar foregrounds the territorial and epistemic dimensions of injustice—how dispossession is simultaneously material and symbolic, and how participation and democracy are undermined when local voices and knowledges are disqualified. The Italian public grammar places at the center the institutional and professional terrain where ambivalence becomes structural, generating moral overload and demanding a reflexive balance between engagement, rigor, and public exposure. The Korean public grammar highlights the cultural–political dynamics of social fragmentation—generational, gender, and ideological divides—and shows how collective emotions may be reworked through civic movements and even transnational cultural practices into affective communities that reopen channels of recognition beyond national boundaries. The cross-cultural dialogue developed here therefore does not reveal three local variants of a single concept. Rather, it makes visible different public grammars through which love acquires socio-political meaning under historically specific configurations of power, inequality, institutions, and democratic struggle. Viewed interpretively, the analytical value of this dialogue lies precisely in reconstructing both shared relational dynamics and historically specific configurations that would remain less evident within a single-case analysis. At the same time, the dialogical reconstruction contributes to bringing into conversation sociological traditions that often remain separated by linguistic, regional, and academic boundaries, thereby expanding the international visibility of debates that have largely developed in parallel.

Thus, on one hand, love serves as a valuable analytical tool for sociology, as studying how people love and care for each other in various contexts—especially in those marked by extreme violence, precariousness, and inequality—can uncover the keys to social resistance in the 21st century. On the other hand, love represents a way of “doing politics” from an emotional standpoint, a collective action that mends what social conflict tears apart. Consequently, the collective nature of love and its intersection with social practices opens a space to reflect on its role in social transformation and in building more supportive communities (Scribano 2019). At the same time, love cannot be assumed to be inherently emancipatory: like all emotions, it may sustain solidarity or exclusion, democratic openness or symbolic closure, depending on the institutions and narratives through which it is organized.

Taken together, these heuristic and contrastive cases show that the public significance of love cannot be inferred from any single institutional or cultural context. Instead, as heuristic and analytical reconstructions, they invite further reflection on the conditions under which different public grammars enable love to become a socio-political resource. More broadly, the article suggests that love offers a productive analytical bridge between the sociology of emotions and public sociology, showing how affective life and democratic public life are co-constituted through shared practices of care, recognition, responsibility, and collective action. This also clarifies the open questions that remain at the core of any sociological project of de-privatizing love. Under what institutional conditions can love operate as a collective responsibility rather than as a demand placed on individuals already burdened by structural contradictions? How can the public articulation of love and empathy avoid being absorbed into consensual rhetoric that masks inequality, or into communicative regimes that reward persuasion over listening? And how can sociology contribute to keeping love analytically public as a lens for making power relations visible, for recognizing plural knowledges, and for imagining solidaristic futures, without reducing it to either a purely moral vocabulary or an apolitical celebration of cohesion? The transnational dialogue developed in this article does not close these questions; it makes them sharper. Yet it also offers a clear direction: treating love as socio-political—de-privatized, situated, and ambivalent—opens a sociological pathway for rethinking the “art of living together”

through solidarity, shared responsibility, and cultural transformation, precisely because it refuses to separate emotions from the material and symbolic structures that organize public life.

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Notes

- ¹ In the Brazilian debate, these processes often refer to mining expansion, hydroelectric megaprojects, agribusiness frontiers, and infrastructure corridors, especially in Amazonian and rural regions where development conflicts intersect with indigenous, environmental, and territorial claims.
- ² Situated knowledges refers here to forms of practical, territorial, and historically embedded knowledge developed by local communities, indigenous peoples, and social movements, often marginalized by technocratic or externally imposed expertise.
- ³ In Italy, sociology underwent a discontinuous process of institutionalization. During the Fascist period, the discipline was marginalized and constrained by a political and intellectual climate unfavourable to autonomous critical inquiry. A more substantial phase of academic development began in the postwar decades and accelerated in the 1960s with the creation of major institutional centres and the expansion of sociological teaching and research. Its subsequent trajectory was shaped by the coexistence of Catholic, socialist, and communist intellectual traditions, by the politicization of the discipline during the conflicts of the late 1960s and 1970s, and by further consolidation in the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, sociology's public and professional legitimacy has often remained uneven, as other disciplines and professions—notably law, psychology, education, economics, and political science—have frequently enjoyed stronger institutional recognition, clearer jurisdictions, and greater public authority.
- ⁴ A Korean relational-affective concept referring to bonds of attachment, affection, and enduring mutual concern developed through long-term social interaction. It is broader than romantic love and often includes family, friendship, neighborhood, and collective ties.
- ⁵ The Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) means the global diffusion of South Korean popular culture—including K-pop, television dramas (K-dramas), cinema, fashion, and digital media—which has expanded significantly since the late 1990s, shaping transnational cultural consumption and new affective communities.
- ⁶ The Gwangju Uprising, remembered as the May 18 Democratization Movement, was a major pro-democracy uprising that took place in May 1980 in the city of Gwangju against the military regime. Its violent repression became a foundational event in South Korean democratic memory, and it continues to symbolize civic resistance, collective solidarity, and the struggle for democracy.
- ⁷ The Candlelight Revolution refers to the mass peaceful protests of 2016–2017 triggered by the political scandal involving President Park Geun-hye. Millions of citizens participated in candlelight demonstrations demanding accountability, leading to impeachment and marking a major democratic turning point in South Korea.
- ⁸ The Revolution of Light is used here as an analytical term to describe the renewed cycle of democratic civic mobilizations in 2025–2026, characterized by peaceful protest, constitutionalism, and collective demands for democratic integrity. It is intended as an interpretive expression rather than an official political label.

- ⁹ The reference to impeachment rulings upheld by the Constitutional Court concerns moments in which mass civic mobilization remained within constitutional and institutional channels, with the final decision on presidential removal confirmed through judicial review (Constitutional Court of Korea, Case No. 2024Hun-Na8, 2025). In the South Korean context, this underscores how popular protest and constitutional legality have interacted rather than opposed one another during periods of democratic crisis.
- ¹⁰ As noted above, *Hallyu*, or the Korean Wave, refers to the global spread of South Korean popular culture and the transnational communities of identification and participation it has generated.

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