



Article

# On Regret: A Sociological Intersectional Approach

Maria Madalena d’Avelar

Centro de Investigação e Estudos de Sociologia, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), 1649-026 Lisboa, Portugal; mmdbr@iscte.pt

**Abstract:** Regret is more than just an individual cognitive and emotional phenomenon, and it can, and should, be seen as social and cultural as well. Because of this, regret can tell us a lot, both about someone’s biography, and about the society and culture that shape it. In this brief reflection, the aim is to look at regret as a phenomenon worthy of sociological focus. We focus on three main ways in which regret can be understood as a sociological object: regret as a part of someone’s biography, regret as something that is culturally shaped, and regret as a part of collective memory. We also explore the potentialities of using an intersectional framework to analyze regret in its different forms.

**Keywords:** regret; intersectionality

## 1. Introduction

Rather than this being a theoretical paper, and even less an empirical one, this text aims to be a brief, yet hopefully thought-provoking, reflection on regret and how we can look at it, making use of a sociological approach, and from an intersectional perspective.

Regret is a lot more complex than one might expect. As with any other subjective emotion, it can be hard to strictly define, but a general definition could be “a sad feeling because of something that has happened or something that you have done or not done” ([Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries 2021](#)).

However, what does it really mean to regret something? Are all regrets the same? What can regret tell us about the individual who experiences the regret, and about the world in which this regret comes to be?

Regret has received research attention throughout the years in fields such as psychology and economics, particularly from decision theorists, who have studied the key role this emotion plays in decision-making processes and in producing adaptive behavior (e.g., [Bell 1982](#); [Loomes and Sugden 1982](#); [Byrne 2002](#); [Connolly and Zeelenberg 2002](#); [Roese and Morrison 2009](#)). Other authors have also dedicated themselves to exploring the psychological processes involved in regret, trying to understand what regret is, why we feel it, when we feel it, and towards what (e.g., [Gilovich and Medvec 1995](#); [Roese and Summerville 2005](#)).

Sociology, however, has not given a lot of attention to regret, and there is not much sociological theory or research dedicated to it. Regret can tell us a lot, both about someone’s biography, and about the society and culture that shapes it. Does it not then make sense to look at regret as a phenomenon worthy of sociological focus?

In this brief reflection, we would like to focus on three main ways in which regret can be understood as a sociological object: regret as a part of someone’s biography, regret as something that is culturally shaped, and regret as a part of collective memory. These three framings of regret focus on different levels of the experience of regret, from the individual to the social and collective. In the last section of the paper, we approach regret using an intersectional framework to show just how valuable this kind of perspective can be to a sociological analysis of regret.



**Citation:** d’Avelar, Maria Madalena. 2022. On Regret: A Sociological Intersectional Approach. *Social Sciences* 11: 50. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11020050>

Academic Editors: Violeta Alarcão, Sónia Cardoso Pintassilgo and Pedro Candeias

Received: 2 December 2021

Accepted: 25 January 2022

Published: 28 January 2022

**Publisher’s Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 2. On Regret: A Sociological Intersectional Approach

### 2.1. *Regret as Part of One's Biography*

In one of her diaries, Virginia Woolf wrote: "At the moment I can only note that the past is beautiful because one never realizes emotion at the time. It expands later and thus we don't have complete emotions about the present, only about the past" (Woolf 1980).

What Woolf tells us could also be applied to the reflexive way in which we look at and evaluate a certain situation. Putting it in a very provocative way, we could say "we don't have complete reflexivity about the present, only about the past"—the key word here being complete. It is provocative because it is not completely precise. There is, of course, a reflexivity (or even many different types of reflexivity) that we employ in our everyday lives to guide our actions. What I mean to say here is that it is only when looking back that we can fully interpret a certain action, take into account all the consequences it had, and decide what we think and how we fully feel about it. Thus, this type of cognitive and emotional evaluation (which serves as the fundament to the feeling of regret) is always a result of our present standards—meaning that this interpretation is always colored by the present focus, and it tells us as much about the present as it does about the past.

This is why that evaluation can also change over time, making it so that the same moment/action/decision can be seen differently by the same individual, in different points of their life course. We can regret something now, and later on come to think of it as something that we are actually glad happened, or that was not so important after all. Or the opposite can happen, and we can grow to regret something we did not at the time, based on a new perspective of that event, or on its unexpected consequences.

The intensity of the regret we feel towards the same event can also change over time. For example, with the passage of time, and as the temporal distance between a certain event and the present time widens, people might tend to regret that event less, not just because the emotional response to it lessens in strength, but also because they may gain a different perspective in their present about their biography as a whole, and that event in particular.

Of course, that is not always the case. Sometimes, the regret associated with a certain event is so heavy that it stands the test of time. Other times, it can actually become stronger, exactly because the present perspective towards it allows the individual to better understand just how determinant that event was in their biography, and how much they regret the impact it had.

We can also change the way we feel about a certain event because we have since changed as a person, and developed new priorities, a new sense of self, and new projects and goals, and all of that allows us to have a different perspective. Regret is then tightly linked to both temporality and identity, and to the way these two interact with each other. Reflexivity is also key here, functioning as a kind of mediator, in a way. It is not only about who we are right now, and what happened in the past or how long it has been, but also, and maybe even more importantly, how we think about it.

Regret is an emotion with a productive power. This means that regret about the past actually shapes the present and future, affecting the way a person feels and influencing the way they will act. Regret can be key in determining an individual's biography, as it can completely shape future decisions, shift trajectories, and kickstart agency. In fact, people often evaluate regret positively because they feel it helps them make sense of past experiences and gain insight into the self (Saffrey et al. 2008). However, it can also function as a passivity trap, when an individual is so focused on thinking about their perceived mistakes, and all the possible what-ifs, that it hinders their present life. Here, it often appears linked with other emotions, such as hopelessness and guilt, and it can even contribute heavily to mental unwellness.

The distinction of the role of regret in an individual's trajectory (facilitator of passivity versus agency) is related to the focus. When regret is paired with an excessive focus on the past, it can trap individuals into reliving and overthinking that past; when it is paired with a focus on the future, all that regretful energy is used to shape new actions.

So, understanding why someone regrets something can then tell us a lot, not only about that person's life story, but also about that individual's biography and their present self: Who are they? How do they feel about where they are in life right now? What is the social and cultural context that surrounds them, and can that help us better make sense of a certain regret? These are all very interesting questions that interweave the concepts of identity, temporality, and reflexivity.

We tend to look at someone's past as something that is made up of all the things that happened to them so far. However, what about all the things that did not happen? Do they not also have an impact on the shaping of someone's life? To quote Virginia Woolf again, "A light here required a shadow there". (Woolf 1927, p. 59)

A path taken requires all the paths not taken, and all the ways one can feel about them right now, as well as all the emotions that they can harbor for the decisions that ruled them out—amongst them, regret.

Thus, should we not, as sociologists, also look into all these shadows? Do they not have an impact on the present? On the future? Do they not play a potentially important role in creating biographies, in shaping identities, in producing agency? Do they not tell us something not only about who that person is (and is not), but also about the cultural and social circumstances that served to shape their path?

Regret is as often about the done as it is about the undone. This forces us to recognize that, sometimes, things that do not happen can be just as decisive as the ones that do happen. Susie Scott, who has been dedicated to studying the Sociology of Nothing, calls attention to the fact that nonevents and nonobjects can be, indeed, creative and productive (Scott 2018).

Moreover, even though there are similarities between the regret of action and the regret of inaction, there can also be differences in the experiences of these two types of regret. Gilovich and Medvec (1995) actually propose that there is a temporal pattern to the experience of regret, which varies according to the type of regret in question: actions generate more regret in the short term, while inactions or omissions tend to produce more regret in the long run.

Now of course, at the beginning of this section, I somewhat unfairly immediately shifted the focus to reflexivity. However, for an artist such as Woolf, it is a lot more beautiful to focus on emotions, and her point does stand. Indeed, regret has both cognitive and emotional dimensions, incorporating both cognitive elements, such as imagination, memory, judgment, or evaluation, and emotional ones, such as sorrow, grief, or pain (Landman 1993).

We can look at regret as an emotion, a very complex one, and one that cannot exist completely in the present, but only in the past. Even so, as we have seen, regret can also shape and guide our present action—be it because regret about past decisions leads us to act differently in a similar situation now, or simply because of the strength of the fear of regret.

In a society where notions such as "you only live once" or "no regrets" are quite common, the mere fear that something we do (or do not do) might lead us to feel regret may be enough to settle our course of action. Thus, a regret not yet had—the shadow of regret—can also play a role here in shaping one's biography.

Regret, at least a biographical one, often implies a sense of responsibility and agency. After all, as we have seen, we tend to mostly regret the things we feel we might have been able to change—by acting, by not acting, or by acting differently. Thus, at least to a certain degree, regret tends to imply a notion of responsibility and a perception of the possibilities for agency.

We feel regret mostly in relation to situations in which we feel like we had the agency to act differently. Roese and Summerville (2005), when studying what domains in life produce the greatest potential for regret using archival and laboratory evidence, discovered a link between perceived opportunity and experienced regret. According to these authors, people tend to feel regret more intensely in the areas of their lives where they perceive that

they have more opportunities. This is very interesting, considering the impact that social class has when it comes to both objective and perceived opportunities, and how much it can impact agency, namely, in spheres of life such as education and employment.

This means regret can tell us a lot, not only about the way a person is evaluating a certain situation in their life, but also about their place and role in that situation, and how they perceive their ability to potentially change it.

For example, associating a feeling of regret with unemployment could potentially give us some information about how an individual perceives the unemployment situation they are in, and if they attribute personal responsibility to it, or if they instead see it as something out of their control—no matter what might be the actual reality of that situation.

Sometimes, this link between personal responsibility and regret is not totally grounded in rationality. Because regret is an emotional reaction, it is possible that a person rationally recognizes that a certain situation was out of their control, but still feels individual regret and responsibility towards it. Very often, this is more culturally telling than we realize.

For example, some mothers feel strong emotions of regret, as well as guilt, related to not being able to breastfeed, even when there are health reasons that make doing so impossible (Fahlquist 2016).

While both regret and guilt are emotions that are linked to negative outcomes for which someone feels responsible, guilt is present mostly in experiences where there is perceived interpersonal harm, meaning a negative outcome for others (Zeelenberg and Breugelmans 2008). This perception of an outcome that we are, in part, responsible for, which causes harm not only to ourselves, but to others too, can make the emotion of regret even more intense.

These women feel as if they are “failed mothers”, and their self-esteem is affected. In this case, the regret is not merely a result of not being able to do something they wish they could, but it is also linked to discourses surrounding breastfeeding, to the way they are communicated to these women by healthcare staff and by society in general, and to the cultural symbolic weight associated with breastfeeding and its strong connection to notions of good mothering.

## 2.2. *Regret as Culturally Shaped*

What makes people look back on their past and regret something in particular about it?

Obviously, there is an individual component here; maybe the path taken did not bring someone all that they had hoped for, or perhaps it even led them into difficult situations they think could have been avoided if other choices had been made.

However, not all regrets are the same, culturally speaking. Orna Donath’s book, *Regretting Motherhood* (Donath 2017), tells us the stories of women who regret becoming mothers. This type of regret is still a huge taboo because of the cultural assumption that motherhood is a “natural” role for women. On the other hand, women who do not want to become mothers are constantly told that they will surely regret their decision later in life. Could not this difference be related to certain “cultural discourses” about regret, which make it so that certain regrets regarding certain life spheres are acceptable (or are even to be expected) for certain groups of people, while others are definitely not? Moreover, if that is the case, can regrets, and the cultural discourses around them, not tell us a lot about a number of social and cultural structures and values?

For example, this certainty of regret when it comes to a women’s decision to remain childless can be easily linked to the cultural notion that a woman’s most important role in life is to become a mother, and that failing to do so will inevitably leave her feeling unsatisfied with her life. This notion that women will inexorably regret not having children is deeply engraved in our society’s ideology of motherhood. There is no space for regret in motherhood, which is still, in a lot of ways, naturalized and seen as instinctual. This shadow of regret only gains strength from the fact that the decision to enter motherhood has a biological deadline, and that, past it, the choice will no longer be there.

According to Donath (2015, 2017), regret is used as a powerful reproducer of the ideology of motherhood. Women who do not become mothers end up experiencing regret because the analysis they make of their own life trajectory follows a culturally constructed standard, which prioritizes reproduction and establishes motherhood as an integral part of a women's life.

However, there are other examples of this unequal distribution of regrets. Some studies suggest that women tend to regret hookups that involve intercourse more, in comparison to hookups that do not, while also tending to regret hookups more, in comparison to men (Uecker and Martinez 2017). This difference in regret can be easily connected to gendered norms and the power imbalance created by the sexual double standard. In this case, the unequal distribution of regret with regard to gender and the type of sex act can be seen as a result of specific gender and sexual regimes. Women have more to lose in terms of power and social status by participating in casual sexual relations, while, for men, these sorts of arrangements actually represent gains in these same areas.

So, are there cultural discourses about regret? Or is it simply that regret is shaped according to the processes and structures that organize our society? Or maybe both? In any way, one thing is for sure, and that is that regrets can tell us a lot, not only about one's biography, but also about the cultural and social organization in which it arises. It is these cultural systems of values and beliefs that prescribe when regret is required or prohibited, legitimate or unfounded, and appropriate or unreasonable, and this categorization varies in different social arenas and life spheres. Often, the things we are meant to regret fit non-normative pathways (such as not having children). In a way, culturally shaped regret functions as a regulator, making sure that we follow social and cultural norms as much as possible, with the threat of regret looming over our shoulders every time we stir away from them.

We all regret, but we do so in different ways, which can vary individually, contextually, or culturally. In a way, we can consider there to be an unequal distribution of regrets—meaning that certain social groups seem to more easily feel regret about particular things, and in particular contexts and circumstances. Looking into that unequal distribution and trying to answer three basic questions—Who are the people that regret? What are they regretting? What is the context in which they regret?—will probably tell us a lot about social processes and power dynamics.

### 2.3. Regret as a Part of Collective Memory

"I would like to express my deepest regrets for these wounds of the past, the pain of which is now revived by the discrimination still too present in our societies", wrote Belgium's King Philippe in 2020, in a letter to Félix Tshisekedi, the president of the Democratic Republic of Congo, regarding the country's colonial past (Picheta 2020). It was the first time in Belgium's history that a monarch formally expressed regret for the violence carried out by the former colonial power.

Philippe's letter was sent on the 60th anniversary of the Democratic Republic of Congo's Independence, following growing demands that Belgium reassess its colonial past. However, the reigning king was accused of falling short of the formal apology many had asked for, including the United Nations (Picheta 2020; Pronczuk and Specia 2020).

This is not an isolated event, but is, instead, part of a recent wave of demands for acknowledgment and atonement for the misdeeds of colonialism. In 2021, Amsterdam's mayor, Femke Halsema, formally apologized for the city's involvement in the global slave trade, saying that the moment had come for the city to "confront its grim history" (Furtula and Corder 2021). Apologies for slavery have been issued by other countries, including the United Kingdom, the United States, and France, and several more countries are being asked to confront their colonial pasts; just last year, the Council of Europe stated that further efforts were necessary for Portugal to come to terms with its past human rights violations, and recognize its colonial past and its role in the transatlantic slave trade (Walderssee and Demony 2021).

Although the demand for this kind of collective regret has gained a new strength and visibility in the wake of the global Black Lives Matter protests, its history reaches further back than recent years. Apologies and expressions of regret have been around for a while in modern societies, and they are not exclusive to colonialism and slavery; they go from Pope John Paul II's admitting the church's errors in condemning Galileo in 1992, to Japan's several instances of the formal recognition of, and apologies for, wartime crimes.

Jeffrey K. Olick (2007) writes about the politics of regret, and he points out the prevalence of regret in contemporary discourses, to the point that he suggests that regret might be seen as the "emblem of our times" (Olick 2007, p. 14).

Nowadays, there is a growing awareness that it is not only certain social minorities that have been unfairly treated throughout history, but it is also that history itself, and the way in which it has been written and told so far, has been reproducing and reinforcing that inequality. As a result, various social movements, as well as several transnational and nongovernmental organizations, have been demanding that the history of these groups be brought back from the margins, and that all of the injustices towards them be recognized and acknowledged.

National discourses that previously used to focus on golden eras, practicing a sort of collective denial of problematic pasts, and painting the nations in a good light as much as possible, are now scrutinized, and everything that was hidden in the shadows of history is being brought to light. In this context, for nation-states to ensure their legitimacy, they must show that they regret their problematic histories, are ready to account for historical wrongs, and that they promise they will try to do things differently in the future. Notions such as the formal apology, restitution, reparation, and historical inquiry become established, and a number of "reparative politics" emerge.

With the general acceptance of a "universal human rights" paradigm, collective memory, and what we, here, call "collective regret", have been placed in the center of modernity.

Regret on the collective level distances itself, in many ways, from biographical regret when we focus on the concepts of responsibility and agency. Contrary to biographical regret, where there is a close link between regret and perceived agency, when it comes to collective regret, the experience of regret is often directed towards events where there was no direct agency from the party now expressing regret.

When talking about collective regret, it might make sense to talk not about personal responsibility, but about a collective one. For example, one might not be personally responsible for a particular historical event, but they can be a part of the social group, or even a representative of the institution, that is considered to be responsible for it.

Of course, that could pose the question: To what extent is someone responsible for the actions of their predecessors? Can someone feel regret, without taking on some of that responsibility? Or does the experience of regret imply, at least to a certain degree, the acknowledgment of some responsibility, albeit collective and not personal. Moreover, how far back into the past are we supposed to go when identifying injustices that should be regretted, and remedied?

These are not the only difficult questions that arise when thinking about collective regret. Aldrich (2018), when discussing apologies, restitutions, and compensations for colonialism, poses a number of interrogations that are meant to highlight some of the difficulties we can face when it comes to trying to make reparations for colonial pasts:

"Who determines the nature and extent of colonial-era 'crimes'—historians, jurists, legislators? According to which law code (and the legislation of which era) would colonial crimes be judged, and by whom? Would present-day statutes against 'crimes against humanity' and 'war crimes' be applicable? What does acceptance of responsibility for real or perceived wrongdoings entail? What sentiments would apologies convey, and who decides whether they provide satisfaction? What form would reparations take, and how would any sum be calculated? What reciprocal gestures would be envisaged? What misdeeds committed by non-Westerners or by indigenous peoples against each other would also

be acknowledged? Must there be apologies and reparations for an innumerable list of deeds through the course of history?"

(Aldrich 2018, pp. 2–3)

The goal here is not to try to find an answer to all of these complex questions, nor to understand the actual reach of collective regret. We also do not aim to determine just how effective collective regret can be in shifting the dominant power relationships, or if it is mostly performative, or even if there is a limit to how much we can regret the past using today's moral system.

What we argue is that the rise of regret in contemporary times, and the growing role it plays in collective memory, should be understood using a sociological and historical frame. Collective regret is a social product, and, as such, it can only be explained when taking into consideration the different historical, social, cultural, and political elements that participate in its production—no matter if we consider it morally wrong or right, appropriate and desirable or dangerous and excessive.

Most of all, what we want to point out is that regret has undoubtedly permeated collective memory, occupying an increasingly central role in it, and in the way that we, as a society, have come to view our history. In addition to that, in the same way as it did when it played a part in an individual's trajectory (though with a very different scope and consequences), collective regret has the potential to be productive. The ones who have been demanding that their voices be heard, and who have been trying to make sure that their side of history reaches the light, are certainly more aware of this than anyone else.

#### 2.4. *Regret, an Intersectional Approach*

Until now, we have explored different levels of the experience of regret—from the individual to the social and collective. In this last section, our main goal is not to propose another level of analysis, but to try to show some of the advantages of looking at regret, in its different forms and levels, making use of an intersectional approach.

Why is it useful to bring intersectionality into this discussion? Does it make sense to talk about something such as intersectional regret? Or is all regret inherently intersectional?

In her book, *Intersectionality: an intellectual history*, Ange-Marie Hancock (2016) presents intersectionality's intellectual project as being twofold. Firstly, it is "an analytical approach to understanding relations between categories"; and secondly, it is "a project to render visible and remediable previously invisible, unaddressed material effects of the socio-political location of Black women or women of color" (Hancock 2016, p. 33). We can use this same twofold view here to better understand regret as intersectional.

First, we can use the intersectional analytical approach to look at regret. We have seen that regret, even in its individual form, does not exist in a void, and that it is shaped and molded by the social and cultural settings that frame it. Bringing an intersectional view into this analysis allows us to pay more attention to the ways in which regret is shaped by complex relationships between different social categories of race, gender, social class, sexuality, nation, age, and ethnicity.

We can look at regrets in the context of motherhood as an example once again. In this case, bringing intersectionality into the conversation allows us to realize that regret in the context of motherhood is not only gendered, but it also differs according to a multitude of other factors, such as age, disability, race, and social class. This happens because views about motherhood also tend to vary according to these categories and the ways in which they intersect.

For example, there is a history of women of color being considered illegitimate reproducers, and of them being given structural disincentives to reproduce, or even being subjected to involuntary sterilization (Weissman 2016). In the United States, in the twentieth century, 30 American states participated in eugenics programs that ensured the involuntary sterilization of tens of thousands of women (just in North Carolina, a total of 7600 people were sterilized, some as young as nine years old), the majority of whom were women of color (Carmon 2014). In the 1970s, the Czech Republic passed sterilization policies that

targeted Romani women (Denysenko 2007), and in 2013, Israel admitted for the first time to giving Ethiopian Jewish immigrants birth control injections without their knowledge (Dawber 2013). Moreover, between 1948 and 1996, a law in Japan allowed the involuntary sterilization of people with intellectual and mental disabilities, justifying the measure as a way to “prevent birth of inferior descendants” (Tsuchiya 1997, p. 1).

If the previously mentioned premise of motherhood being a necessity in a woman’s life shifts when considering these different groups of women, then it stands to reason that the symbolic meaning of regret linked to motherhood would also be felt differently by these groups. The weight of the reproductive expectation imposed by gender would still be present, but it would now intersect with other factors that interfere with, or that even counterpose it, which should alter the way that this regret is experienced and lived.

This analytical approach makes it easy to understand regret as inherently intersectional. After all, if regret is a product of an individual’s trajectory, if it is framed and shaped by cultural discourses and social systems, and if we know that those same trajectories, discourses, and systems are all also intersectional, then it is simple to come to the conclusion that regret will be intersectional as well—meaning that regret will also be the result of a complex net of relationships between different social categories, and that it can only be understood when considering them and the ways in which they intersect.

We can also easily understand the role regret plays in the second outlook on intersectionality; more specifically, collective regret has been central to the project of giving visibility to previously hidden social groups. After all, we have seen already how regret has become a key element in contemporary collective history and memory, and how, more often than not, it serves exactly to point out the misdoings and injustices that have targeted social minorities in the past.

Interestingly, the involuntary sterilization of women from minority groups has been the target of collective regret, and there have been several instances in which the survivors have demanded apologies and compensation. Some American states, such as California, have agreed to pay reparations to those who were forcibly sterilized (Mossburg 2021), and Japan has passed a bill to offer JPY 3.2 million to each of the survivors who were sterilized between 1948 and 1996 under their eugenics law (Rich and Inoue 2019).

However, even though regret towards these historic events has been productive in that it has led to reparatory actions, it does not seem to have had the wished-for effect in preventing repetition and building a more equal future. Indeed, just last year, in 2020, there were several accusations of unnecessary hysterectomies being performed on immigrant women in the custody of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Bekiempis 2020; Dickerson et al. 2020), showing that history repeats itself, even when regret is featured.

This brings back the questions regarding the effectiveness of collective regret in shaping future action, and of just how much of it is performative. In a way, this can be seen to mirror individual regret—after all, just because we regret something, or acknowledge it to be wrong, that does not necessarily mean that we would do it differently if given the chance. Only in this case, there are a lot more political and cultural variables at play.

Even so, collective regret can also be considered intersectional in that it is indeed deeply interwoven into these social and political movements, if not inherently, then at least in the way that it has been constructed and used. Collective regret, as it is, has been a tool, a symbol, and a product of the intersectional project. The mere existence of collective regret directed at these groups can be seen as the proof of some success of the intersectional agenda because, behind this regret, there is the acknowledgment of things that had previously remained untold and unseen, as well as the admission of wrongdoing—even with all its shortcomings.

So, does it make sense to talk about something such as intersectional regret? I would say it is worth it only if it helps us to take into consideration, and more keenly pay attention to: (1) The many ways in which regret is shaped according to the complex power relationships that structure our society, and the various categories they create; and (2) The



role regret plays in intersectionality as a sociopolitical agenda and movement, and how we can explore its potentialities and limitations.

Calling regret “intersectional” helps bring attention to all of these dimensions, which can be easily forgotten when talking about regret. It works as a way of making sure that we do not leave them out of the analysis, but it does not have any comparative value—you cannot really oppose intersectional regret and nonintersectional regret because the latter does not exist. What you can do is oppose an analysis of regret that takes into account intersectionality, and one that does not.

Ultimately though, regret is intersectional in much the same way that all our experiences and emotions are, so we could also consider it somewhat redundant to call it so. Is regret intersectional? Yes; however, if we consider intersectionality as a way of understanding the social and cultural world, and our experiences in it, everything could—and should—be considered intersectional, and be studied as such.

Either way, our main argument here is that there is much to gain from looking at regret while making use of an intersectional approach, since it forces us to look beyond the individual level and brings the cultural, social and political aspects of experiences of regret into the analysis.

### 3. Conclusions

Regret is linked to what is left out of the story, be it an individual’s life story or a nation-state legacy. It pulls from the margins, and it makes us look into the shadows and consider everything that could have happened differently, and all the different realities that could have come to be, but never did, and never will.

Regret is personal and situational, social and cultural, individual and collective. It comes in many forms, with different functions and meanings, and with different results and effects. It can be productive and creative, it can change the course of individual action and the history of a nation, or it can be embedded in passive nostalgia, a performance that cries over the past without being willing to change the future.

Considering these different framings of regret separately allows us to better understand their similarities and differences, as well as the ways in which the levels of agency and responsibility shift considerably in between them. Yet, there seems to be much to gain from looking at the phenomena of regret, taking into account all of these different levels and shapes, and questioning how they might connect and intersect.

Regret is also undoubtedly intersectional, and knowing this allows us to look at this cognitive–emotional phenomena while taking into account all of the ways in which it mirrors, stems from, and reproduces the relationships and dynamics of social power and inequality—and all of the ways in which it can be used to subvert and counter them.

Either way, whether it is used to better make sense of a life course trajectory, to deepen the understanding of cultural discourses surrounding certain social groups, or to point out systematic social inequalities, there is no doubt that regret is a valuable sociological object.

**Funding:** The author acknowledges funding from Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, grant number 2020.08919.BD.

**Acknowledgments:** I am grateful for the opportunity to collaborate with the editors in this special issue. I would like to sincerely thank everyone involved in getting this paper from the original manuscript into the finished version, with a special thanks to the reviewers for taking the time to read my paper, and for their very insightful comments and observations, which greatly improved it. I also want to thank Ana Caetano and Magda Nico, coordinator and co-coordinator of research project Echoes: biographical echoes, for inviting me to participate on the second edition of their project’s conference. It was this innovative and thought-provoking conference that first got me thinking about the benefits of a sociological approach of regret, and which inspired this paper. Lastly, I want to thank my lovely supervisors, Violeta Alarcão and Sónia Pintassilgo, for always encouraging me to challenge myself.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

- Aldrich, Robert. 2018. Apologies, Restitutions, and Compensation: Making Reparations for Colonialism. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*. Edited by Martin Thomas and Andrew S. Thompson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 714–32.
- Bekiempis, Victoria. 2020. More Immigrant Women Say They Were Abused by Ice Gynecologist. *The Guardian*. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/dec/22/ice-gynecologist-hysterectomies-georgia> (accessed on 1 December 2021).
- Bell, David E. 1982. Regret in Decision Making under Uncertainty. *Operations Research* 20: 961–81. [CrossRef]
- Byrne, Ruth M. J. 2002. Mental models and counterfactual thoughts about what might have been. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 6: 426–31. [CrossRef]
- Carmon, Irin. 2014. For Eugenic Sterilization Victims, Belated Justice. *NBC Universal*. Available online: <https://www.msnbc.com/all/eugenic-sterilization-victims-belated-justice-msna358381> (accessed on 1 December 2021).
- Connolly, Terry, and Marcel Zeelenberg. 2002. Regret in Decision Making. *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 11: 212–6. [CrossRef]
- Dawber, Alister. 2013. Israel Gave Birth Control to Ethiopian Jews without Their Consent. *Independent UK*. Available online: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/israel-gave-birth-control-to-ethiopian-jews-without-their-consent-8468800.html> (accessed on 1 December 2021).
- Denysenko, Marina. 2007. Sterilised Roma accuse Czechs. *BBC News*. Available online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6409699.stm> (accessed on 1 December 2021).
- Dickerson, Caitlin, Seth F. Wessler, and Miriam Jordan. 2020. Immigrants Say They Wre Pressured Into Unneeded Surgeries. *BBC World News*. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/29/us/ice-hysterectomies-surgeries-georgia.html> (accessed on 1 December 2021).
- Donath, Orna. 2015. Regretting Motherhood: A Sociopolitical Analysis. *Signs* 40: 343–67. [CrossRef]
- Donath, Orna. 2017. *Regretting Motherhood: A Study*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.
- Fahlquist, Jessica Nihlén. 2016. Experience of non-breastfeeding mothers: Norms and ethically responsible risk communication. *Nursing Ethics* 23: 231–41. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Furtula, Aleksandar, and Mike Corder. 2021. Amsterdam Mayor Apologizes for City Fathers' Role in Slavery. *ABC News*. Available online: <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/amsterdam-mayor-apologizes-city-fathers-role-slavery-78604982> (accessed on 1 December 2021).
- Gilovich, Thomas, and Victoria Husted Medvec. 1995. The Experience of Regret: What, When, and Why. *Psychological Review* 102: 379–95. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Hancock, Ange-Marie. 2016. *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Landman, Janet. 1993. *Regret: The Persistence of the Possible*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Loomes, Graham, and Robert Sugden. 1982. Regret Theory: An Alternative Theory of Rational Choice Under Uncertainty. *The Economic Journal* 92: 805–24. [CrossRef]
- Mossburg, Cheri. 2021. California Will Compensate Survivors of Its Forced Sterilization Program. *Cable News Network (CNN US)*. Available online: <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/07/14/us/california-forced-sterilization-eugenics-payments/index.html> (accessed on 1 December 2021).
- Olick, Jeffrey K. 2007. *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility*. New York: Routledge.
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries. 2021. Definition of Regret Verb from the Oxford Learner's Dictionaries. Available online: [https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/regret\\_1?q=regret](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/regret_1?q=regret) (accessed on 1 December 2021).
- Picheta, Rob. 2020. Belgium's King Sends 'Regrets' to Congo for Leopold II Atrocities—But Doesn't Apologize. *Cable News Network (CNN World)*. Available online: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/30/europe/belgium-drc-leopold-ii-regrets-scli-intl/index.html> (accessed on 1 December 2021).
- Pronczuk, Monika, and Megan Specia. 2020. Belgium's King Sends Letter of Regret over Colonial Past in Congo. *The New York Times*. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/30/world/europe/belgium-king-congo.html> (accessed on 1 December 2021).
- Rich, Motoko, and Makiko Inoue. 2019. Japan to Compensate Forcibly Sterilized Patients, Decades after the Fact. *The New York Times*. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/25/world/asia/japan-sterilization-eugenics-compensation.html> (accessed on 1 December 2021).
- Roese, Neal J., and Mike Morrison. 2009. The Psychology of Counterfactual Thinking. *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 32: 16–26.
- Roese, Neal J., and Amy Summerville. 2005. What We Regret Most . . . and Why. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 31: 1273–85. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Saffrey, Colleen, Amy Summerville, and Neal J. Roese. 2008. Praise for regret: People value regret above other negative emotions. *Motivation and Emotion* 32: 46–54. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Scott, Susie. 2018. A Sociology of Nothing: Understanding the Unmarked. *Sociology* 52: 3–19. [CrossRef]
- Tsuchiya, Takashi. 1997. Eugenic sterilizations in Japan and recent demands for apology: A report. *Newsletter of the Network on Ethics and Intellectual Disability* 3: 1–17.
- Uecker, Jeremy E., and Brandon C. Martinez. 2017. When and Why Women Regret Sex in Hookups More than Men Do: An analysis of the Online College Social Life Survey. *The Sociological Quarterly* 58: 470–94. [CrossRef]

- Waldersee, Victoria, and Catarina Demony. 2021. Confront Your Colonial Past, Council of Europe Tells Portugal. *Reuters*. Available online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-portugal-rights-racism-idUSKBN2BG138> (accessed on 1 December 2021).
- Weissman, Anna L. 2016. Repronormativity and the Reproduction of the Nation-State: The State and Sexuality Collide. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 13: 277–305. [CrossRef]
- Woolf, Virginia. 1927. *To the Lighthouse*. London: Penguin Random House UK.
- Woolf, Virginia. 1980. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 3—1925–30*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Zeelenberg, Marcel, and Seger M. Breugelmans. 2008. The role of interpersonal harm in distinguishing regret from guilt. *Emotion* 8: 589–96. [CrossRef] [PubMed]