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## What Are Public Moods?

Ringmar, Erik

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PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00

Lund, Sweden, July 1, 2017

Dear reader,

In laymen's discourse you often hear references to "public moods" — something or another happened, we are told, because of "the public mood" of a society — but in the social sciences public moods are never used as an analytical concept. Either the laymen are wrong or social scientists have missed out on an important aspect of social life. In this paper I explore the latter of these possibilities.

The article doesn't have a home yet, but please refer to as Ringmar, Erik. "What Are Public Moods?" Dept of Political Science, Lund University, July 2017.

Thanks for reading, happy summer.

Erik

# What Are Public Moods?

*Abstract:* "Public moods" are often referred to in laymen's accounts of public reactions to social events, yet the concept has rarely been invoked by social scientists. Taking public moods seriously as an analytical concept, this article relies on recent work on the moods of individuals as a means of exploring the moods of the public. A public mood is a matter of how a public body, constituted by processes of muscular bonding and joint attention, comes to attune itself to the situation in which it finds itself. It is in the public mood thus understood that emotions, thoughts and plans for action arise. These processes work slightly differently for crowds, participants in ceremonies and games, for audiences, and for an age as a whole.

*Key words:* Public moods, moods, attunement, emotions, embodiment, phenomenological sociology.

In newspapers and on the Internet references are constantly made to "public moods" and "national moods" or, more vaguely, to the "spirit of the times" or to the *Zeitgeist*. There was a unique mood to the 1960s, we have often been told, which gave a characteristic tone to social and political life of that era, and those who experienced the public mood in the United States in the wake of the 9/11 attacks have no doubts regarding its singular quality. Likewise, references are often made to financial markets which are in a "depressed" or an "ebullient" mood or to the varying moods of consumers, voters or television audiences. The Brexit decision has altered the mood of Europeans in a more pro-EU direction, according to Germany's Minister of Finance, and American playwrights who protest against racism are "in sync with the national mood."<sup>1</sup> The opinion polls which preceded the presidential election in the United States in 2016 utterly failed to capture the mood of the public.<sup>2</sup> Somehow or another, this public mood was instead captured by Donald Trump.

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1 Reuters, "Germany's Schaeuble"; Isherwood, "Black Female Playwrights Want You to Face Facts. The Harsh Ones."

2 Yin, "With Shifts in National Mood Come Shifts in Words We Use, Study Suggests"; Bruni, "The Democrats Screwed Up."

Given the prevalence of such references, we would expect public moods to feature prominently in the accounts provided by social scientists too. Yet, surprisingly, this has not been the case.<sup>3</sup> Either the laymen are mistaken or social scientists have missed out on an important aspect of social life. In this article it is the latter of these possibilities we will explore. Admittedly, the first generation of sociologists — scholars such as Georg Simmel, Gustave le Bon and Gabriel Tarde — presumed something like the existence of public moods but they neither properly defined them nor investigated them at any length.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary sociologists have discussed topics such as “mass psychology” and the “dynamics of group behavior” but no one has treated public moods as anything like an analytical concept.<sup>5</sup> The occasional social psychologist has relied on questionnaires and statistical techniques, but surely this cannot be the right way to proceed since public moods, whatever they might be, cannot be reduced to the opinions of individuals.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps public moods are too impressionistic and too fleeting to lend themselves to scientific analyses. “We know from experience,” as Stefan Zweig put it when attempting to describe the public mood in Europe prior to the Great War, “that it is a thousand times easier to reconstruct the facts of an era than its spiritual atmosphere.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps you have to be an artist — a Pablo Picasso or a Bob Dylan — to capture the mood of your time. What artists do is to *show us* the mood, and while social scientists can describe and explain, they have next to nothing they can show their readers. As long as social scientists limit themselves to the measurable and the describable, public moods will continue to escape them.

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3 The occasional, path-breaking, sociologist has discussed the moods of individuals. Silver, “The Moodiness of Action,” 199–222; See also Silver and Clark, *Scenes: Culture and Place*; The occasional, path-breaking, philosopher has discussed the moods of publics. Weber-Guskar, “Moved by Masses?”

4 Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 26–39.

5 Moscovici, *The Age of the Crowd*; Ginneken, *Mood Contagion*; Borch, *The Politics of Crowds*; Walkerdine and Blackman, *Mass Hysteria*.

6 Rahn, Kroeger, and Kite, “A Framework for the Study of Public Mood,” 29–58; See, however, Solomon, “Ontological Security, Circulations of Affect, and the Arab Spring.”

7 Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, 205.

Yet help is at hand. Cognitive theorists, neuroscientists and philosophers with phenomenological inclinations have recently discussed the moods of individuals in some considerable detail, and it is with their assistance that we will proceed. The public mood, we will argue, is not just a general mood, a pervasive mood, or a mood which is particularly common in a society, but instead the mood pertaining to an entity known as “the public” which at the same time is both embodied and imagined. Social bonding is more than a figure of speech: neurological processes taking place on a pre-cognitive level are responsible for coordinating basic physiological functions and for making individuals react at the same time and in the same fashion. An imagined public self comes into a fictive existence by means of processes of joint attention such as those which characterize the audiences present at public events. Joint attention too is a means of coordinating individual bodies, thoughts and actions. It is the public thus embodied and imagined that finds itself in a public mood.

## 1. Four kinds of publics

Reading laymen's accounts, it is obvious that the “public” to which they refer is not the same in all cases. At least four different notions of a public are commonly invoked: publics formed by crowds, by the participants in games and ceremonies, by the audience at public performances, and, far more amorously, by an age or an era. It is to the publics thus understood that moods are ascribed.

### CROWDS

A crowd is a group of people who gather in the same place at the same time. Members of crowds are unknown to each other before they assemble; they are spontaneous,

leaderless, and united by no explicit program or official purpose.<sup>8</sup> Members of crowds engage in some common activity — they are dancing, shouting, chanting, racing or chasing each other — but there are no particular rules for how they should behave. The public is constituted by the crowd, made up of the aggregate collection of bodies, and it is the public thus understood which is characterized by a certain mood. The public mood is an emergent property which cannot be reduced to the moods of individuals. This *mentalité de la foule*, the first generation of sociologists concluded, is hopelessly emotional and violent, and, worryingly, it overrides the faculties of individuals and subjects them to the irrational powers of the collective whole.<sup>9</sup> “It is one of the most revealing, purely sociological phenomena,” as Georg Simmel put it, “that the individual feels himself carried by the 'mood' of the mass, as if by an external force that is quite indifferent to his own subjective being and wishing, and yet that the mass is exclusively composed of just such individuals.”<sup>10</sup> Crowds are mobs — “a large or disorderly group of people; especially one bent on riotous or destructive action.”<sup>11</sup> But crowds can clearly be in other moods too. Some crowds, such as those that gathered in Tahrir Square in Cairo in the first months of 2011, are happy and festive. “The atmosphere is simply amazing” in the words of one participant, “everyone is so friendly, there's no anger, no harassment, just solidarity and remarkable energy.”<sup>12</sup>

## PARTICIPANTS

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8 See, inter alia, Borch, *The Politics of Crowds*; Moscovici, *The Age of the Crowd*; Walkerdine and Blackman, *Mass Hysteria*; Ginneken, *Mood Contagion*; Weber-Guskar, “Moved by Masses?,” 2.

9 Borch, *The Politics of Crowds*; Weber-Guskar, “Moved by Masses?”

10 Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 35.

11 Wiktionary, “Mob,” <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/mob#Noun>.

12 Quoted in Siddique, Owen, and Gabbatt, “Protests in Egypt and Unrest in Middle East – as It Happened.”

But there are other kinds of publics. Participants are people who gather in a particular place in order to take part in a coordinated group activity of some kind.<sup>13</sup> They have assembled for a purpose and they know what they are supposed to do; there are rules for their activities, although they may be tacit and only socially and informally supervised. Games provide an example and so do religious ceremonies and coordinated political and social activities of all kinds. Participants are people who follow a banner, march in goose-step or in defense of a common cause; they are kneeling together, standing up for their beliefs, kicking a ball around, stretching and bending in the same way in the same exercises. People at a funeral, a political rally or a birthday party are not crowds but participants — most of them are behaving as expected and in the same fashion. They are also likely to partake of the same mood — at least their bodies are assuming similar postures and they have more or less the same expressions on their faces. The only requirement for this mood to become public is that it is present among participants who take part in a public event. People holding up multicolored cards become participants in a public event if they assemble in a large sports stadium in Pyongyang, North Korea, during the Arirang Festival.<sup>14</sup> The Arirang Festival has an audience of course, not least fellow North Koreans watching the spectacle on TV, but at least in the official propaganda, they are participants too, all celebrating the same Juche ideology. If the activities of participants have an audience it is only incidental to the proceedings. There is no audience at the Thaipusam festival in Penang or during the New Year's celebrations at the Meiji Shrine in Tokyo. Foreign tourists may be watching to be sure, but there is a sense in which they — whether they are aware of it or not — are intruding on the proceedings.

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13 See, *inter alia*, Giesen, "Performing the Sacred," 325–67.

14 Terry and Wood, "Presenting Juche," 177–201.

## AUDIENCES

A public can also consist of the members of an audience, such as the audience at a concert or a theatrical performance, who pay joint attention to something that transpires before them. A public space opens up between the stage and the audience which is characterized by a certain mood. Something is taking place before us and we, the people watching, are clapping, laughing or perhaps weeping in response. This mood does not belong to the audience, and it is not an emergent property of their interaction, but is instead presented to them by the performance. The audience members experience it vicariously and they will be influenced by it only to the extent that they pay attention and let themselves be influenced. We can enter the public mood, as it were, but also exit from it. You shed a tear during the movie and yet you leave the cinema perfectly happy and with your mind on entirely different things.

Audiences are not confined to traditional theatrical settings. We can talk about a “social performance” as any event staged in public in front of an audience in order to convey a message or make a point, and social performances have moods too.<sup>15</sup> To stage a social performance is today more than anything a question of appearing before cameras and microphone, to be uploaded to social media and to go viral on the Internet. The public spaces which open up here are far larger than anything we can find in a theater, and the existence of a public is not dependent on the co-presence of others. You can watch the performance on your own, on a television screen or a telephone; you can watch it repeatedly over and over, and each time there will be implied others who will be watching the performance with you. As long as these implied others pay attention in the same

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15 A social performance occurs whenever someone stages an event in front of an audience in order to convey a message or make a point. Alexander, “Cultural Pragmatics,” 29–90: AUTHOR.



fashion they will have the same vicarious experiences and come to share in the same public mood.

## THE AGE

There is, finally, a far wider, more amorphous, notion of a public which includes all members of a society or perhaps everyone alive at a given moment in time. This is the public we refer to when we talk about the “mood of an age” or what Martin Heidegger referred to as a the *Grundstimmungen* of a certain era.<sup>16</sup> On Heidegger's list was *Staunen*, “astonishment,” in classical Greece, and *Langeweile* and *Angst*— “boredom” and “anxiety”— in contemporary society. More casually, and with far less philosophical import, we often talk about a certain decade as characterized by a certain mood. Thus the 1950s was allegedly a time of affluence but also anxiety; the 1960s, a time of liberation and experimentation; the 1970s, a decade of recession and lost hopes, and so on.

The mood of an age requires no crowds or participants and it requires no performances. This makes it annoyingly difficult to capture. Although performances may express the mood of an age, and crowds many embody it, the mood itself is independent of expressions and manifestations. The mood of an age remains in the background, like a basic architecture, a lay of the land, in which many different things can occur.<sup>17</sup> Or, if we stick with the performance metaphor, we might say that the mood of an age provides us with a stage on which various props can be found but without any indication regarding the purposes for which they are intended. The mood of an age may identify a range of feasible options without singling out any particular option within that range. And yet it is somehow inescapable, ineluctable, and the foundation for everything else that we do.<sup>18</sup>

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16 Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 64–77.

17 Thiele, “Postmodernity and the Routinization of Novelty,” 489–517.

18 It may, for example, influence differences in how balls are thrown. Young, “Throwing Like a Girl,” 137–56.

## 2. The moods of individuals

So far we have identified four kinds of publics but we have said nothing regarding what a mood itself might be. To assist us here, consider moods as they pertain to individuals — a topic which recently has attracted considerable attention.<sup>19</sup> A first distinction to be drawn here concerns the difference between moods and emotions. In everyday usage the two are of course often treated as the same. Thus to be “depressed” or “excited” denotes an emotion but we also talk about a “depressed” or an “excited” mood. Yet emotions have a cognitive content which moods lack. Emotions are directed towards particular objects; they are ways of interpreting, editing and organizing the world.<sup>20</sup> But moods do not work that way. Instead moods precede our interpretation, coloring everything we see around us in a certain hue. Moods “skew the epistemic landscape,” and give perceptions, beliefs and evaluations a certain tendency.<sup>21</sup> The interpretation arises *out of* the mood, as it were, and not the other way around. If I am in a cranky mood and I snap at you, you are neither the cause nor the object of my reaction, but rather something akin to an innocent bystander. Realizing as much we may even apologize, saying “Sorry, it’s not your fault, I’m just in a bad mood today.”<sup>22</sup>

It is more than anything this all-pervading, pre-cognitive, quality which makes moods ephemeral and difficult to grasp. The everyday language in which moods are discussed reveals the problem. We do not say “I have a mood” the way we might say that we have a feeling, a thought or an impression; instead we say “I am *in* a certain mood,” implying that we find ourselves in the mood rather than finding the mood in us. We are not the owners of the mood, as it were, but instead the mood seems to own us. In what follows it is this

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19 Goldie, *The Emotions*, 143–51; Stanghellini and Rosfort, *Emotions and Personhood*; Carroll, “Art and Mood,” 525–33.

20 Carroll, “Art and Mood,” 521–55.

21 Goldie, *The Emotions*, 130.

22 Carroll, “Art and Mood,” 526.

curious use of language we will investigate. Two questions are particularly pressing. First, when we find ourselves in a certain mood, where is it that we find ourselves? And, secondly, when we eventually do find ourselves, who, or perhaps what, is it that we find?

## THE MOOD OF A SITUATION

To find oneself in a certain mood is to find oneself in a certain situation. That is, we find ourselves in a situation characterized by a mood. And sure enough, we commonly talk about places and situations as having moods. It is to this mood that we refer when we say that a place is characterized by a particular "atmosphere."<sup>23</sup> In its most literal sense — understood as the *atmos*, "vapor," of a certain *sphaira*, "sphere" — an atmosphere refers to climactic conditions, to the weather and the seasons, and clearly the weather often helps to put us in a certain mood.<sup>24</sup> But we can also talk about the atmosphere of a place and what we have in mind here is something like the "spatial bearer of moods."<sup>25</sup> There are metaphorical spheres that surround locations, as it were, and these spheres are infused with an affective tone. The atmosphere defines the situation as a whole as a situation of a certain kind.<sup>26</sup> Thus a meeting may be conducted in a "constructive atmosphere," a derelict building a "spooky atmosphere," a summer evening "a serene atmosphere," and so on. Entering into a doctor's examination room, a nightclub or a place of religious worship, we begin by taking in the atmosphere as a whole and only later do we come to pay proper attention to the objects and people which the situation contains. It is only against the

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23 Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," 119; Bollnow, *Human Space*; Healy, "Atmospheres of Consumption," 35–43.

24 Faedda et al., "Seasonal Mood Disorders," 17–23.

25 Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," 113–26.

26 Silver, "The Moodiness of Action," 207–15; Harrison, "Smoke Rising from the Villages of the Dead," 257–274.

background of a certain atmosphere that something comes to stand out as a thing of a certain kind.<sup>27</sup>

Atmospheres understood as spatial bearers of moods are at the same time highly elusive and perfectly obvious. Although they are impossible to firmly grasp there is at the same time no doubt regarding their singular qualities.<sup>28</sup> We are, for example, highly unlikely to mistake a tense atmosphere for a melancholic or a sexy atmosphere for an uplifting. The reason we never make such mistakes is that our ability to understand atmospheres is a precondition for our ability to successfully navigate social situations. We assess the situation automatically and in a flash. This does not mean that atmospheres cannot change, and some changes may be very abrupt indeed.<sup>29</sup> Melancholia may suddenly turn into wistfulness and the inspiring seminar become unbearably boring. And these radical changes moreover may take place although everything else in the situation remains exactly the same as before.

## FINDING OUR BODIES IN A MOOD

What we find in these situations — and this is the answer to our second question above — is not ourselves as much our bodies. Or rather, what we find in a situation is first of all ourselves understood as our bodies. This is obvious from the curious fact that our bodies often seem to know far more about our moods than do our cognitive selves. Moods, after all, can often be interpreted already from a person's posture, gait or general demeanor, and it may be obvious to others before it is obvious to ourselves.<sup>30</sup> Our posture reveals our mood. "You seem depressed today!" someone might tell us when they find us slumped on

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27 Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," 125; Ratcliffe, "Heidegger's Attunement and the Neuropsychology of Emotion," 290; Adey, "Security Atmospheres or the Crystallisation of Worlds," 834–851.

28 Anderson, "Affective Atmospheres," 78.

29 Ibid.

30 Slaby, "Affective Arrangements and Disclosive Postures."

a sofa in a limp and listless position and it may only be once others find us in this mood that we find ourselves there too.<sup>31</sup> Our bodies are in a mood before we are; or perhaps better: we are in our bodies before we are fully present to our conscious selves.

Moods, from this point of view, are a matter of a certain bodily stance. Since the body always has a certain posture, we must always be in a certain mood. There can be no mood-less engagement with the world just as there can be no body-less engagement. This is why moods often seem to have physiological rather than psychological causes. Many moods depend on our physical constitution — on our state of health or on how well we have slept the night before. Thus a headache may put us in a dejected mood while a morning jog can make us confident about the day ahead. And even if their ultimate causes may remain obscure, moods are easily manipulated with the help of drugs — drugs administered by doctors, recreational drugs, or everyday drugs like coffee and alcohol.<sup>32</sup> Compare the way “mood disorders” such as schizophrenia are treated with pills rather than with psychoanalysis. The mood, and thereby the problem, is not in our minds as much as in our bodies. Or rather, trying to locate a mood we find that the body cannot be separated from the mind. The mood has both a physiological basis and a psychological expression.

## MOOD AS ATTUNEMENT

Yet moods are ultimately neither features of situations nor of bodies but instead of the interaction between the two. Moods do not characterize entities but denote instead a process whereby a certain way we feel comes to be synchronized with the feel of the situation in which we find ourselves. It is this process which Germanic languages get at by

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31 Straus, “The Upright Posture,” 549; Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 170–75; Gunes et al., “Bodily Expression for Automatic Affect Recognition,” 1–33.

32 Deijen, Heemstra, and Orlebeke, “Dietary Effects on Mood and Performance,” 275–83.

referring to moods as *Stimmungen*, from the verb *stimmen*, "to tune."<sup>33</sup> To tune is what we do with a guitar when we adjust the pitch of the strings to establish an interval between them which sounds natural and harmonious. The strings, we say, are "in" or "out of" tune; that is, in or out of tune with each other. In much the same way, being in a certain mood is to be "in tune," or "in harmony," with our environment and with other people.<sup>34</sup>

These references to musical metaphors are not coincidental. The reason is that music is a preeminent way of conveying moods. As a non-representational medium, music is bad at telling stories and providing information, and it is not even very good at expressing emotions since emotions have a cognitive content which music lacks. And yet because of its objectlessness, music can set a mood in an instant. Consider the soundtrack of a movie. As all film directors know, the mood of a scene can be radically altered if we only change the music that accompanies it. Or consider muzak, the soundtracks that accompany our shopping selves, influencing the way we feel about an elevator, a hotel lobby or a shop and thereby also our purchasing decisions.<sup>35</sup>

It is the state of our attunement to a situation that we report on when we come to answer a question of how we feel.<sup>36</sup> "How do you feel?" a friend, or perhaps a doctor, asks us, and the answer we give reports on how we find ourselves in a certain situation. If we are in tune, we will feel at home and we will behave appropriately and as expected; if we are out of tune we will feel homeless, out of place, and at a loss for what to do. And obviously there are a number of intermediary stages between perfect attunement and total disconnect and thereby many different ways in which we can fit, or not fit, in. "I feel rootless," we might say, or "awkward," "overwhelmed," "over the moon," "abandoned,"

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33 Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 169; cf. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 63–66; Cf. Spitzer, *Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony*; Weber-Guskar, "Moved by Masses?," 10–12.

34 Cochrane, "Joint Attention to Music," 59–73.

35 Radano, "Interpreting Muzak," 448–60.

36 Ratcliffe, "Heidegger's Attunement and the Neuropsychology of Emotion," 289–290; Rosfort and Stanghellini, "In the Mood for Thought," 395–417; Adey, "Security Atmospheres or the Crystallisation of Worlds," 834–851.

“torn,” “disconnected,” “invulnerable,” “unloved,” “watched,” “empty,” “at one with life,” “real,” and so on.<sup>37</sup>

The situations to which we attune ourselves are not necessarily only physical and immediately present but they can also be imaginary. That is, we can make them up. Consider what happens when we read a book, watch a play or a movie.<sup>38</sup> Here we are presented with a narrative and narratives too have moods. There may be an overall mood to the narrative as a whole — often denoted already by its genre: romcoms have different moods than do horror stories — but in addition each scene has a mood of its own. Curiously, these moods are not written into the actual words of the text or the play, and it is this absence that our imagination depends on for its operations. There are gaps in the text, as it were, through which the mood can seep into the narrative, giving everything that happens a certain feel. An author sketches a scene — and the better the author, the more evocative the mood — but the rest of the work we, as readers, have to do for ourselves. Instead of only reading the words, we experience them tacitly, feel them internally, with our bodies and not only with our minds.<sup>39</sup> In this way we are able to take up two positions at once: we are the readers but also the vicarious witnesses to the unfolding of events. By tuning in and out of the mood of the narrative, we can move between these roles.<sup>40</sup>

## THINGS THAT ARISE

Moods, we said, have no cognitive content and they are not things. Instead moods constitute an affective environment in which different things can arise. That is, once we have attuned ourselves to a situation, we come to discover many things which we previously were unable to see. Moods have entailments and implications; they point to a

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37 These are what Ratcliffe refers to as “existential feelings.” Ratcliffe, “The Feeling of Being,” 45.

38 Thiele, *The Heart of Judgment*, 201–76.

39 Ibid., 255.

40 Langellier, “A Phenomenological Approach to Audience,” 38.

“further more” which never is obvious beforehand but which instead has to be discovered and explored step by step.<sup>41</sup> The mood gives us inklings, intuitions, *Ahnungen* and hunches. Consider a scary mood which alerts us to danger; to things that may leap out at us in the dark, to grounds that may give and walls that may topple. And with the scary mood comes a particular set of emotional reactions as well as a set of thoughts and behaviors. Incidentally, this also explains how we as readers make sense of the plot of a narrative. The mood allows us to imagine what will happen next, not as matter of logical deduction but as a question of what feels or does not feel right.<sup>42</sup> Moving back and forth between anticipations and recollections we become entrained by the story, meaning “drawn along in the manner of a current.”<sup>43</sup> The story captures us by means of its mood and we are held and carried along by the anticipation of events.

This process of discovery is at the heart of all processes of creation. Imagine yourself an artist working on a painting or a poet writing a poem.<sup>44</sup> The work is not yet complete, something is missing. So you add a few brush strokes or some words, but they do not feel quite right and you realize right away they are not what you were looking for. So you try again, making new additions until you are satisfied. When all the necessary implications have been deduced, and they feel right, the work is finished. Curiously, it is as though the brush strokes and the words are coming to you rather than you coming to them. The mood has presented you with something; something has come to light; it is as though a message has been conveyed to you by an angel or a god. “Sing in me, oh Muse, and through me tell the story.”<sup>45</sup>

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41 Gendlin, “A Phenomenology of Emotions,” 371–73; AUTHOR.

42 Iser, “The Reading Process,” 283.

43 Wiktionary, “Entrain,” <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/entrain>.

44 Gendlin, “The Primacy of the Body, Not the Primacy of Perception,” 348.

45 Homer quoted in Dylan, “Nobel Lecture”; “Ideas occur to us,” as Max Weber noted, “when they please, not when it pleases us.” Weber, “From Max Weber,” 136.



This is how actions too suddenly arise.<sup>46</sup> Once we have attuned ourselves to a mood, we know what is expected of us. The mood is soliciting us, as it were, calling out to us, and in response we do what we are required to do. Our actions, moreover, are often automatic, unreflective, and not preceded by a conscious act of the will.<sup>47</sup> Much as when someone calls our name — or when our phones ring — we just answer. The action which we settle on here is more than anything the one for which our habits have prepared us, the one for which we have been primed.<sup>48</sup> This is how an empty room invites us to dance, how a path in the forest asks us to walk on it, and a newly made bed insists that we lay down. Or consider the mood prevailing in a place of religious worship. Sacred places teach not by verbal communication but by inducing a mood of reverence and awe. We bow our heads and pray since this, clearly, is what the situation requires.

Emotions arise too. When we are in a certain mood, one emotion quite automatically leads to another, stringing each other along.<sup>49</sup> Thus happy thoughts come to us when we are in a happy mood while in a pessimistic mood failure is always imminent. As long as our predictions are confirmed we simply go along with the mood, letting our anticipations reinforce our convictions. Yet there are also times when our expectations are confounded. Suddenly the mood has changed and thereby the feel of the entire situation. In response we react with frustration, blurt something out, give vent to an emotion.<sup>50</sup> The emotion breaks the mood, as it were, and it is suddenly impossible to go on as before. “What's wrong with this crazy door?”; “why can my children never listen to me?” Out of place and out of fit we have to reassess our options; that is, we have to attune ourselves to the new mood of the situation in which we find ourselves.

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46 Silver, “The Moodiness of Action,” 199–222; AUTHOR.

47 Ibid., 210–11; Cf. the “affordances” discussed by Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*; Weber-Guskar, “Moved by Masses?,” 6.

48 Bargh and Chartrand, “The Unbearable Automaticity of Being,” 462–79; James, *Principles of Psychology*, 1:104–127; Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 1–88.

49 Gendlin, “A Phenomenology of Emotions,” 380–91; Carroll, “Art and Mood,” 521–55.

50 Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 76; Cf. Gendlin, “A Phenomenology of Emotions,” 384–88.

### 3. Public moods

We are now in a position to say a bit more about what a public mood might be. Public moods are a matter of situations — public situations — that can be described in terms of a certain atmosphere; it is a matter of a body — a public body — that finds itself in this public situation; but more than anything it is a matter of the interaction between the two — how public bodies come to attune themselves to the situations in which they find themselves.<sup>51</sup> There are three forms of attunement that matter here: the way individuals attune themselves to each other; the way they attune themselves to an object of joint attention; and the way societies as a whole attune themselves to a given age.

#### ATTUNEMENT TO EACH OTHER

The public body of a crowd, of participants, and of an audience are first of all created as individuals come to attune themselves to each other. This is most likely to happen, the first generation of sociologists pointed out, when the bodies of individuals find themselves in close proximity to each other.<sup>52</sup> The people assembled seem to behave, much like schools of fish or herds of deer, as though they constituted one unified body. A process of bonding is taking place through which a generalized mood spreads from one person to the next. Yet it was impossible for the likes of George Simmel, Gustave le Bon and Gabriel Tarde to provide a convincing explanation of the psychological and physical mechanisms involved. These influences, said Simmel, happen “through effusions of feeling that are hard to ascertain.”<sup>53</sup> Somehow or another the “unconscious” seemed to be engaged, or perhaps individuals were controlled remotely, much as a hypnotist may direct the mind of a

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51 Weber-Guskar, “Moved by Masses?,” 6–11.

52 Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 35; Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 6.

53 Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 35; Cf. Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 7–8; Tarde, *Social Laws*, 32–33.

hypnotized subject.<sup>54</sup> The result, in any case, was that the people involved came to imitate each other both unconsciously and automatically. The process, said Tarde, can be compared to photographic reproduction. "By imitation I mean every impression of an inter-psychical photography, so to speak, willed or not willed, passive or active."<sup>55</sup>

Today we are in a position to explain these effects with considerably more sophistication.<sup>56</sup> Thanks to advances in neuroimaging, we can actually see what is going on in the bodies of people who assemble in close proximity to each other. Collectively we can talk about this as "chameleon effects."<sup>57</sup> Chameleon effects occur whenever people automatically and without quite realizing it come to adjust to each other — adopting similar bodily postures, folding the arms in the same way, yawning or laughing in the same fashion.<sup>58</sup> The presence of so called "mirror neurons" go some way towards explaining these effects.<sup>59</sup> As neuroscientists have shown, whenever we observe someone doing something, areas of our brains responsible for processing visual information are activated but so too are the areas which would be responsible if we were to carry out the task ourselves. The observer's brain is not only watching but also acting, as it were; in fact, as far as the brain is concerned, watching is a kind of acting. And when bodily postures are copied, moods are copied too — the mood is conveyed through the imitation of bodily postures.<sup>60</sup> This is the means by which the public body of the crowd find itself in a public mood.

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54 Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation*, 77, 87; C f. Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 11.

55 Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation*, xiv.

56 Froese and Allsen, "The Extended Body," 205–35.

57 Chartrand and Bargh, "The Chameleon Effect," 893–910; Hale and Hamilton, "Cognitive Mechanisms for Responding to Mimicry from Others," 106–123; Maister and Tsakiris, "Intimate Imitation," 108–113; Lakin et al., "The Chameleon Effect as Social Glue," 145–162.

58 Schmidt et al., "Bodily Synchronization Underlying Joke Telling," 1–13; Provine, "Yawning," 532–39.

59 Rizzolatti et al., "From Mirror Neurons to Imitation," 247–65; Gallese and Goldman, "Mirror Neurons and the Simulation Theory of Mind-Reading," 493–501.

60 Even forced physical postures have been shown to have an impact on moods. See Strack, Martin, and Stepper, "Inhibiting and Facilitating Conditions of the Human Smile," 768–77; Kraft and Pressman, "Grin and Bear It," 1372–78.

As for participants, they share moods above all through a process of what we might refer to as “muscular bonding.”<sup>61</sup> By singing in a choir, rowing a boat, dancing, praying together with others and so on, the physical movements of one person are coordinated with the physical movements of others. As a result, a number of physiological processes are synchronized too, including breathing and heart beats, blood pressures, gastric and endocrinal processes.<sup>62</sup> And this in turn leads to a synchronization of various cognitive processes. People increasingly come to think about the same topics, in a similar fashion; they are more ready to appreciate other opinions and to empathize with each other.<sup>63</sup> Participants consider themselves a collective “we” that shares a point of view, a set of interests and a future.<sup>64</sup> These effects are particularly strong if the bodies are synchronized according to a rhythmic pattern or if they move along to the same beat.<sup>65</sup> When we dance together with others, or march in goose step, dopamine levels in the brain are raised; we are happy to be together and much happier than if we had carried out the same actions alone. It is easy to imagine ways in which dopamine release in response to coordinated physical activities is favored by biological evolution.

The presence of a public mood makes all the difference here. It is in the public mood that cognitive processes arise. That is, we feel and think and may go on to act alike not because of our physical proximity *per se*, and not actually because of the muscular bonding, but rather because each individual's emotions, thoughts and plans for actions arise in the same public mood. It is because we find ourselves in the same public mood that we have access to the same range of cognitive processes. At the same time it should be obvious

61 Wiltermuth and Heath, “Synchrony and Cooperation,” 1–5; Repp and Su, “Sensorimotor Synchronization,” 403–52; On the phenomenology of joint movement, see Sheets-Johnstone, “Moving in Concert,” 1–19.

62 Weinstein et al., “Singing and Social Bonding,” 152–158; Pearce et al., “Tuning in to Others,” 596–612.

63 Hove and Risen, “It’s All in the Timing,” 949–60.

64 See, *inter alia*, Vacharkulksemsuk and Fredrickson, “Strangers in Sync,” 399–400; Sebanz, Bekkering, and Knoblich, “Joint Action,” 70–76.

65 Koelsch, “Brain Correlates of Music-Evoked Emotions,” 170–180; Vickhoff et al., “Music Structure Determines Heart Rate Variability of Singers,” 1–16.

that public bodies made up of crowds, participants and audiences are coordinated to different degrees. Take crowds. To the extent that their moods depend on little except chameleon-like imitation, they have little by means of purpose and direction. The moods of crowds convey little information, as it were, and as a result they are, much as the first generation of sociologists insisted, likely to be unstable, unruly and easily manipulated.<sup>66</sup> By contrast, the participants in games, ceremonies and rites are highly coordinated and as a result far more predictable cognitive processes will arise. The mood solicits habitual behaviors which are well rehearsed.<sup>67</sup> Yet these effects are at the same time perfectly ephemeral. Once the individual bodies disperse, the public bodies are dismembered and the public mood vanishes too. Since its effects operated mainly on a precognitive level, we may not even acknowledge what happened. At most we may feel as though we have woken up from a dream or a temporary madness, or indeed as though we had been hypnotized.

## ATTUNEMENT AS JOINT ATTENTION

A different, if related, process of attunement takes place by means of joint attention.<sup>68</sup> When jointly attending to something, bodies are not attuning themselves to each other but instead collectively to the situation in which they find themselves. Attention often requires an effort and it is carried out by means of active verbs — we *pay* attention, *faites attention*, *Aufmerksamkeit* schenken, and so on.<sup>69</sup> When paying joint attention together

66 Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 19; Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, note, 60-61; "Intense shared moods," as Weber-Guskar puts it, "undermine [the] basis of moral reasoning." Weber-Guskar, "Moved by Masses?," 12.

67 James, *Principles of Psychology*, 1:104-27; On the neurophysiology involved, see Graybiel, "Habits, Rituals, and the Evaluative Brain," 359-87.

68 James, *Principles of Psychology*, 1:402-59; Csikszentmihalyi, "Attention and the Holistic Approach to Behavior," 1-20; Arvidson, "Toward a Phenomenology of Attention," 71-84; Mundy and Newell, "Attention, Joint Attention, and Social Cognition," 269-274; Shteynberg, "Shared Attention," 579-590.

69 James, *Principles of Psychology*, 1:419-21; Joint attention, as Sheets-Johnstone points out, is a matter of movement movement. Sheets-Johnstone, "Moving in Concert," 4.

with others, our attention is attracted, or is consciously directed, by and to the same objects. There is something to look at and listen to; something is happening before us; an event is taking place, a story is unfolding. The members of the audience are entrained, as it were; their attention is captured by the unfolding of events; they are held and carried along by the narrative — that is, they are captured, held and carried along together. To the extent that we are defined by what we perceive we are defined together with those who perceive the same things as ourselves.<sup>70</sup> It is not I or you who pay attention but we.<sup>71</sup> We are co-subjects; we constitute a public body.

The fact that we pay attention together with others determines the quality of our experience. We know that others are watching, we feel their presence, and our reactions anticipate, and are influenced by, theirs.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, as audience members we may often be reminded of the fact that we are supposed to pay attention together with others. If we make too much noise during a theater performance, or leave our seats, we will be told in no uncertain terms to be quiet and sit down. And today we are all, on the pain of social ostracization, expected to pay attention to the same “breaking news,” viral clips, Twitter and Facebook feeds. If we fail to conform to these requirements, what is interrupted is not only the experiences of individual others but the experience of the whole audience which claims us as one of its own. Yet other audience members do not need to be physically present or even contemporaneous for these effects to occur. We can pay joint attention together with implied others, with people “out there,” and even with those who have gone

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70 Schmitz, “Co-Subjective Consciousness Constitutes Collectives”; Schmid, “The Feeling of Being a Group,” 3–16; Gilbert, “Walking Together,” 1–14.

71 Langellier, “A Phenomenological Approach to Audience,” 36; A neurophysiological perspective is Parks and Manzotti, “Am I the Apple?”

72 Langellier, “A Phenomenological Approach to Audience,” 34–35; De Jaegher and Di Paolo, “Participatory Sense-Making,” 485–507; On the history of attention, see Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*; AUTHOR.

before us or who are yet to be born. There is a communality between everyone who ever has been to Mecca, seen the great pyramids at Giza or Elvis Presley's Graceland.

This communality is not only given by the form of our attention but also by its content, although form and content may be difficult to keep apart. The very fact that we pay attention to the same thing implies that the same content concerns us; that we share an intentional stance and a preoccupation. The situation affords the same opportunities — a way to get a grip on a situation, a way to get along, get by, get ahead.<sup>73</sup> By attuning ourselves to these affordances, the situation reveals what unite us. This is particularly the case if the situation presents us with a story that features a representation of our collective selves. Thus we might read about our country in a newspaper or watch a representation of our nation on TV. What we are attuning ourselves to here is an avatar: a narrated public self who acts and interacts with other narrated public selves. The public body stands before the audience and we, the audience members, we can see ourselves united into one.

For audiences it is more than anything in this public space that public moods appear. The mood is guided by the situation but given by the process of attunement. And it is here that emotions, thoughts and plans for action arise, most obviously perhaps a feeling of fellowship.<sup>74</sup> A co-subject is not just another random person, and it is not an object among others in the world, but someone who might help or instruct us and someone we are more likely to trust.<sup>75</sup> Often we feel an urge to continue sharing experiences with our co-attendants — perhaps recounting our impressions of what we both have witnessed or directing each other's attention to something new that comes up. The public mood,

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73 Schmidt, "Scaffolds for Social Meaning," 137–151; Kaufmann, "Social Minds," 153–180.

74 Schmitz, "Co-Subjective Consciousness Constitutes Collectives," 15.

75 Böckler, Knoblich, and Sebanz, "Giving a Helping Hand," 531–45.

moreover, give us hunches regarding what might happen next and thereby indications concerning what to do.<sup>76</sup>

## ATTUNEMENT AND NICHE CONSTRUCTION

In order to discuss the public mood of an age we need to take a few steps back. All moods are difficult to capture but the mood of an age would seem to be particularly elusive. Annoyingly, there are no obvious entities — crowds, participants or audiences — to whom the mood of an age can be ascribed; instead everyone alive at a certain moment in time seems to be included and everything they do to be affected. As a way to make progress here we will compare moods with other ways in which human beings come to fit into the situations in which they find themselves. Public moods, after all, provide only one of several mechanisms of attunement.

Taking a long-term view, it is more than anything by means of biological evolution that human beings, much as all other species, come to adjust themselves to the environment in which they live. This happens through a process of trial and error — mutation proposes and natural selection disposes — and as a result each species comes to fit ever better into its respective ecological niche. The only problem is that biological evolution is an exceedingly slow process. If a dramatic change in ecological conditions occurs it is unlikely to keep up. Instead a species has to try its luck in another ecological niche or to try, best as it can, to rebuild the niche to fit its requirements.<sup>77</sup> If this cannot be done well or quickly enough, the species dies out.

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76 As Weber-Guskar points out, we often feel that we have a far greater power than is the case and simultaneously less responsibility for the consequences of our actions. Weber-Guskar, "Moved by Masses?," 13–14.

77 Odling-Smee, "Niche Construction in Evolution, Ecosystems and Developmental Biology," 69–92.



Human beings can rebuild their own ecological niches too of course, indeed we are uniquely qualified to do so. Instead of adapting ourselves to the environment, we adapt the environment to our requirements; societies create ecological niches in which they proceed to make a life for themselves. To help us here we rely on what we refer to as a “culture.” Culture too is a means of attunement and a way of fitting in.<sup>78</sup> Our cultures give us the wherewithal to survive, including the required lore, rules of thumb and the standards for measuring success. Much like processes of biological evolution, a culture changes in response to changes in the environment, including those we ourselves have brought about. Perhaps we could talk about a process of “cultural evolution.”<sup>79</sup> Cultural evolution is far quicker than biological evolution and thereby far better at responding to changes in the environment.

Yet social change can sometimes be too quick even for cultural evolution to keep up. An example is provided by the rapid changes undergone by societies in the process of industrialization, such as those which Europe underwent in the latter part of the nineteenth-century. Suddenly a vast proportion of Europeans found themselves in an entirely new setting: they lived in cities, worked in factories, often far away from their places of origin, family and friends. They had to adjust themselves but the culture of agricultural society provided few suggestions. Eventually culture caught up, we could argue, people found a way to survive, yet the transition from agricultural to modern society brought about a period of stress which was reflected in the public mood of the age. The pressures made people sick — above all in a new range of psychosomatic afflictions, including abulia, agnosia, depression, hysteria, neurasthenia, and so on.<sup>80</sup> These are the

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78 Compare what Geertz refers to as an “ethos”: “A people’s ethos is the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects.” Geertz, “Ethos, World-View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols,” 422.

79 For an overview, see Mesoudi, “Cultural Evolution,” 481–97.

80 See, inter alia, Micale, *The Mind of Modernism*; Schuster, *Neurasthenic Nation*; Sass, *Madness and Modernism*.

*Grundstimmungen* which Heidegger identified and the public mood to which the first generation of sociologists reacted.

Societies continued to change rapidly throughout the twentieth-century and at every juncture culture lagged behind. The stress was reflected in the public mood. This is how the 1950s came to be characterized by a mood of affluence and anxiety; the 1960s, by a mood of liberation and experimentation; the 1970s, by a mood of recession and lost hopes, and so on — although, admittedly, these descriptions are clichés and other labels are possible. And in each public mood a given range of emotions, thoughts and plans for action would arise. This was not a matter of a logical deductions from necessary premises, nor of causal relationships between socioeconomic variables, but instead something like a process of creative discovery. The public moods gave rise to hunches, inclinations and *Ahnungen*; a certain life was anticipated and thereby a set of cultural expressions and a certain kind of politics. The anxiety of the 1950s goes well with McCarthyite witch-hunts, social planning and Formica tabletops; the mood of liberation of the 1960s made sex, drugs and rock 'n roll into integral aspects of the same outlook on life. But then the public mood changed and we could no longer quite understand why we felt, thought and reacted the way we did. It all seems like a dream, or a nightmare; as though we had been intoxicated or hypnotized. We are obviously so much smarter now, better educated and less easily seduced. Or rather, we live in an age characterized by a different public mood.

## 4. Conclusion

Public moods are often invoked in laymen's accounts of public reactions to social events, yet public moods have not been relied on as an analytical concept in accounts provided by social scientists. Either the laymen are mistaken or social scientists have missed out on an important aspect of social life. In this article we explored the latter of these possibilities.

Since public moods are not things they have been difficult for social scientists to describe and explain; perhaps public moods cannot be grasped, only shown. Yet some headway can be made by comparing public moods to the moods of individuals. It is the body that finds itself in a mood, we argued, or rather, the mood is given by the way the body attunes itself to the situation in which it finds itself. "How are you?" someone asks, and the answer we give provides a report on the state of our attunement.

Although it might sound slightly awkward at first, social scientists should ask the same question of the public. "How are you?" and the answer we give would report on the state of attunement of a crowd, the participants in a game or a ceremony, an audience, or even of an age as a whole. Here the public body is constituted by muscular bonding, by mirror neurons and by processes of joint attention, and the mood spreads as we come to imitate each other or as we react in the same fashion to the same public performances. These are the public moods in which emotions, thoughts and plans for actions arise; this is the affective foundation for cultural change and how a certain kind of politics becomes possible.

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