

## Article

## Do Societies Have Emotions?

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**Abstract:** In recent decades, there has been a growing interest in the study of emotions, demonstrating their importance in understanding diverse human and social dynamics. However, as this field of study develops and diversifies, a structural yet simple question remains virtually undiscussed: Is it really possible to say that societies possess emotions or a certain sensitivity akin to individual experiences? This exploratory study, based on documentary analysis, endeavours to identify and examine emotional patterns across six different periods, spanning from the Middle Ages to the present day. Among the eight secondary findings, three fundamental conclusions stand out: (1) throughout history, societies have experienced different emotional atmospheres, sometimes simultaneously; (2) although societies generally propose an emotional model to follow, the reality does not always conform to it; and (3) it is mainly through the culture that society creates a certain emotional harmony, allowing the social body to remain cohesive and develop, thus postponing or preventing its disintegration. This study aims to offer a modest contribution to the complex and under-explored discussion on the correlation between specific emotional climates and particular social contexts.

**Keywords:** societies; emotions; social evolution; social cohesion; cultural dynamics

## 1. Introduction

Could it be that wherever there are signs of life associated with a discernible level of consciousness, there are also signs of emotional responses? The answer to this question is not straightforward and depends on the definition of emotions and the threshold of life and consciousness under consideration. Understanding emotions is a concept that has evolved over millennia, and it is still a discussion that not only is not closed but also does not seem to be closing any time soon.

Plato, often regarded as the main pillar of Western catechesis [1–3] (p. 225), posited that within the realm of perfection, and consequently within what he perceived as the place of happiness, there was no place for what is now perceived as emotions [4,5]. From his perspective, emotions were considered an earthly experience, reserved solely for lesser beings, humans, bound to the imperfection and sinfulness of earthly life [6–8]. In this sense, in constructing their ‘ideal’ and following their master Plato, the main ‘official thinkers’ of the Middle Ages did not hesitate to explicitly state in some passages of their writings that to heed the more sensitive side of human nature is to distance oneself from a wise, intelligent life; in other words, lowering oneself to the level of animals [9] (p. 233), [10] (p. 81), [11] (p. 528), [12] (p. 7).

However, as time went on and the light of the so-called Enlightenment increasingly illuminated society and its thoughts, emotions began to acquire a kind of ‘autonomy’. Upon delving into some of the most influential writings of this period, one finds passages that overtly or indirectly extol emotions and exalt this more sensitive facet of human beings [13] (p. 416), [14] (p. 12), [15] (p. 271). Some theories regarding specific emotional expressions started to emerge independently from medieval religious doctrines and, notably, explained without considering the complex Platonic concept of the immortal soul and its many complexities [16] (p. 161).



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Later, with Darwin emerging as a prominent figure akin to a modern Plato (in the sense that his ideas served as a foundational cornerstone for much subsequent thought), a notion previously inconceivable gained theoretical traction and widespread acceptance: Emotions were a fundamental response of human nature, inherited from animal ancestors, and responsible for the survival of the human species [17]. It was predominantly following this premise that modern science gradually broke free from the shackles of religious rationalism and began a prejudice-free examination, initially of human emotions and subsequently extending to emotions beyond the human realm.

With a new theoretical framework, sensitivity and subsequent response to the environment, loosely termed emotion in humans, are now under scrutiny across various life forms, whether in animals [18], plants [19], bacteria [20], or even robots [21]. However, given the focus of this study, an inevitable question arises: What about the discussion concerning societies and their connection with emotions? This question will form the basis of the next topic.

## 2. General Review

The identification and separation of human collectives based on certain emotional expression is nothing new in human history nor in the accounts of that history. A clear example is Western catechesis, which has shaped society for approximately two thousand years [22]. It has achieved this largely based on the premise of a division between ‘good believers’ and ‘bad believers’, according to a specific dogmatic emotional interpretation quoted in the Bible in Luke 6:21 and 25: “Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh” and “Woe unto you that laugh now! for ye shall mourn and weep” [23]. As this religious regime of the social stage gradually faded, another one succeeded, built upon very different pillars [24] (pp. 119, 120). Today, devoid of medieval religious visions, a new mercantilist logic governs the contemporary world. However, it too demonstrates an ability to separate the ‘good from the bad’, in this case, employees, through the interpretation or lack of certain specific emotional thoughts, as shown, among others, by Hochschild’s [25] study *The managed heart: commercialisation of human feeling*.

It is undeniable that in modern times, more so than ever in human history, these shared emotions are becoming less and less dependent on the physical proximity of a group. This specific ‘common feeling’ can be effectively facilitated through various platforms, such as radio, television, or social networks [26–28] (pp. 23, 24), [29] (p. 77). It is not the physical space, and often not even the content, but rather unique emotional expressions that simultaneously ‘unite’ these people, who may be thousands of kilometres apart.

The feeling of the ‘I’ conditioned by the feeling of the ‘we’ has been analysed from different perspectives in recent years, providing us with a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of this phenomenon. Starting with Griffero [30] (p. 262), for example, we realise that some of these sensitive atmospheres may indeed go unnoticed by many. However, when we complement this view with that of Hammond [31] (p. 384), it becomes clear that despite their possible imperceptibility to many, these emotional states do not lack an impact and can even drive social progress. Furthermore, Elias [32] (p. 140) highlighted how our emotional and biological heritage has been exploited in favour of specific social agendas that fluctuate according to the surrounding atmosphere.

So, are we talking about a certain ‘indoctrination of feeling’ depending on the social environment? Drawing from the insights of Turner and Stets [33] (p. 2), we conclude that many sociologists argue that the way we feel is the result of the ideologies, beliefs, and norms that surround us. However, as Turner [34] pointed out, we realise that this ‘emotional catechesis’ can extend further: it can also seek to allocate emotions to particular groups within a social body, such as the common association that certain emotions are more masculine or feminine. We seem to be dealing with a constant ‘negotiation of feeling’, wherein individual feelings are constantly conditioned by collective feelings, whether the individual is aware of it or not. This dynamic is experienced not only in wider social

structures but also, as noted by Layder [35] (pp. 66–88), in all their pillars, such as the family and more intimate relationships.

The connection between societies and emotions is obvious. However, this correlation alone is far from being sufficient to claim that societies inherently possess emotions or anything that can be interpreted as such or similar. Just as a person can use different means of public transport without actually owning any of them, societies can use emotions without actually possessing them in their symbolic nature. This study, faced with this concrete challenge, employs an exploratory approach to analysing whether or not societies have emotions or something similar that can be figuratively interpreted as such, and if so, for what purpose? Before delving further, however, it is necessary to explore some basic concepts that will underpin this research and outline how the search for answers has been methodologically organised.

### 3. Fundamental Concepts

*What is a society?* According to Dowdall [36] (pp. 37, 38), it is the interrelationship of human actions intended to be complementary, forming a group of individuals with specific roles. It relies on a community of shared mental dispositions, where each member plays their respective role as required. Institutions and authority figures influence opportunities and actions within this structure. Giddens [37] (pp. 1133, 1134) simplified this concept by defining society as a system of structured social relationships that bind people together based on a shared culture. He noted that societies vary in size, ranging from small groups to large populations. Messner [38] (p. 386) described society as an association of individuals with a particular type of order or organisation, acknowledging that not all individuals may concur on its formal constitution. Hossain and Ali [39] (p. 131) emphasised that society extends beyond human life, encompassing a range of relationships and behaviours that distinguish individuals within a collective. Meanwhile, Holmwood [40] (p. 592) defined society as a product of the human need for socialisation, which leads to the organisation of groups, the division of tasks, and the need for cooperation in order to achieve a certain level of autonomy. Although the concept of society is intertwined with several others, one concept that is particularly pertinent to this study will be explored in the next paragraph.

*What is culture?* As defined by Kroeber and Kluckhohn [41] (p. 357), culture encompasses both explicit and implicit patterns of behaviour conveyed through symbols, reflecting the unique accomplishments of human groups. They underscore culture's essence as traditional, historically derived, and selectively designated ideas and their associated values. O'Hear [42] (p. 747) defined culture as socially transmitted rather than genetically inherited. According to this author, while individuals are shaped by their cultures in different ways, they also possess the capacity to influence, respond to, and contribute to cultural development. Giddens [37] (p. 1115) succinctly described culture as the values, ceremonies, and ways of life specific to a group. Furthermore, Reed and Alexander [43] (pp. 111, 112) saw culture as the symbolic elements of social life (gestures, language, moral values, etc.) that play a crucial role in actions and social dynamics. But what is the connection between these two analysed concepts?

*What is the connection between society and culture?* A visual image will be used to illustrate this. Society can be thought of as a complex 'piece' that connects individual lives through a shared culture. In this analogy, culture can be seen as the 'glue' that holds this piece together. However, this section still lacks a fundamental concept, which will be analysed below.

*What is an emotion?* The concept of emotion is a complex and wide-ranging topic, often permeated by disagreements and contradictions in the scientific literature [44,45]. However, this study opted not to delve too deeply into these debates to maintain its focus on the proposal outlined. Rather than dwelling on the controversies surrounding the phenomenon of emotion, our aim is to propose a concept that is understandable within the context of this study, guided by a careful selection of options [46,47] (pp. 42, 43), [17] (p. 38), [48] (pp. 28, 29), [49] (p. 197), [50] (pp. 60, 61). Thus, in this study, emotion will be

interpreted as the response, with a certain degree of automatism, of a body endowed with a discernible level of intelligence to stimuli that influence the state of that body. Its primary, though not exclusive, purpose is to act in order to maintain the body's life or make it more comfortable.

This definition, while obviously rigorous, acknowledges the breadth of the field and the possibility of divergent perspectives and thus represents a modest contribution towards understanding this complex phenomenon.

However, the fundamental question of this study is still missing. Do societies have emotions? After analysing the basic concepts, it is important to address the central question driving this study. The next section examines in detail how this question has been approached and explored in this study.

#### 4. Methodological Approach

Documentary analysis, as defined by Moreira [51] (p. 271), involves the identification, verification, and evaluation of documents for a specific purpose. Its objective, according to Carmo and Ferreira [52] (p. 73), is to select, process, and interpret information on stable supports in order to extract some meaning. Pardal and Lopes [53] (p. 103) stressed the importance of this technique in any research, although obviously in countless different ways. Here, in conducting the documentary analysis, the focus was on the literature review, as outlined by Denscombe [54] (p. 11), who considered it an integral part of the documentary analysis. The goal of this stage, according to the same author, is to show how the research relates to previous research and generate specific questions and ideas [54] (p. 293). Therefore, the central question of this study, which concerns the presence of emotions in societies and their role, has naturally led us towards a theoretical framework grounded in a documentary analysis spanning different social and historical periods. Our focus was on Western social reality.

Understanding the concepts of society, culture, and emotion discussed in the previous section proved crucial in shaping the following historical view, which focused on different emotional climates. The proposed emotional climates included fear, shame (or, from another perspective, disgust), surprise, anger, sadness, and happiness (or, more specifically, satisfaction or contentment). Although this choice of emotions aligns with the basic emotions proposed by Ekman [48], it should be noted that it has nothing to do with his proposal and its specificities, at least not directly.

Over nearly a decade ago, the development and maturation of this idea were facilitated by the meticulous recording of notes, inspired somewhat by the traditional diaries maintained by researchers [55,56]. These notes, taken at different times, such as conferences and readings, even on disparate topics, proved instrumental in constructing this exploratory perspective. These notes were later carefully analysed, validated, and articulated based on the fundamental questions outlined in this study [57].

#### 5. Historical Review: A Perspective

##### 5.1. Fear: The Medieval Atmosphere

Fear can be conceptualised as an innate emotional response triggered by the perception of threat, usually mobilising the body into action, but it can also lead to paralysis [46], [49] (p. 226), [50] (p. 68), [58] (pp. 23, 24). The question then arises: Was there a social period when this emotion was particularly pronounced? Yes, in a more or less direct way, fear and the Middle Ages seem to have been closely intertwined in many ways [22,58,59]. So, how does this period, generally placed between the 5th and 15th centuries, relate to fear? We will look at the answer, mainly drawing from Delumeau's work entitled *History of Fear in the West*.

Among the many aspects that characterised this era, a notable element was the profound ignorance surrounding the interpretation of natural phenomena. In many people's minds, there was a fine line between reality and fantasy—a mixture of Roman, Christian, and pagan imagery. Consequently, stories often featured evil spirits and supernatural

beings such as vampires, werewolves, witches, and more. This amalgamation of individual fears—ranging from fear of the unseen, the night, thunderstorms, neighbours, strangers, the stars, the wind, and even one's own body (associated with sin and eternal damnation)—contributed to what Delumeau [58] (p. 33) called a “climate of fear”. This emotional atmosphere was manipulated in favour of collective interests, especially those of the church. “The men of the church” [58] (p. 44) took it upon themselves to name, explain, and exploit these fears, shaping the narratives according to their own interests and beliefs. However, their ambiguous statements and aggressive actions only served to perpetuate and intensify the climate of fear.

Given the apparent ubiquity of this regime, fear, as a facet of human sensitivity, may have paradoxically developed a degree of insensitivity during this period. Delumeau suggested that some individuals may have been less susceptible to fear compared to modern times [58] (p. 22). Fear was so present in the social atmosphere that literary heroes were often portrayed as fearless figures. Characters such as *John the Fearless*, *Charles the Bold*, *Bayard the Fearless Knight*, and others [58] (p. 15) were not just examples of an imaginary and social ideal but, more importantly, a reflection of everyone's common fear.

### 5.2. Shame: One Door out of the Dark Ages

Shame is a distressing emotion associated with the perceived dishonour or inadequacy of behaviour occurring in the presence of a real or imagined audience and often causing discomfort and negative reactions, prompting withdrawal from social exposure [46,60,61] (p. 223). When Ekman [48] analysed basic emotions, he often juxtaposed shame with contrasting perspectives, such as disgust or aversion to something. Different viewpoints, such as Foucault [62], Gilligan [63], and Goffman [64], explored shame's connection to social dynamics, linking it to discipline, the ‘interpretation’ of the female gender, and the formation of our ‘self’ in everyday life. However, Elias's work, *The Civilising Process*, elevates shame to particular prominence and associates it with social change or progress with the abandonment of medieval ideas and customs, as elucidated in the following paragraphs.

In his book, Elias [32] (pp. 53, 54) draws attention to a brief treatise by Erasmus of Rotterdam entitled *On the Civility of Children*, which was published in 1530. According to this author, the wide circulation of Erasmus's work during this period suggests that he was addressing a topic ripe for discussion [32] (p. 54). What was the focus of Erasmus's treatise? Erasmus's book, dedicated to a noble boy, the son of a prince, revolves around a seemingly straightforward subject: the behaviour of individuals in society, with particular emphasis on “outward bodily propriety” [32] (p. 55). The guiding principles outlined in this treatise encompassed various aspects, such as the notion that offering partially eaten food to another person is improper [32] (p. 57) and that retrieving chewed food from one's mouth and placing it back on the table is equally inappropriate [32] (p. 57). Erasmus's admonitions seemed to reflect the emergence of a new emotional regime that coincided with a changing atmosphere characterised by a sense of shame.

At one point, Erasmus made an observation very pertinent to this analysis: “Everyone, from the king and queen to the peasant and his wife, eats with the hands. In the upper class, there are more refined forms of this. One ought to wash one's hands before a meal” [32] (p. 57). Why is this relevant? Although he acknowledges that ‘everyone’ might engage in certain behaviours, the ideal person—the model of this emotional climate—was expected to refrain from such actions. Once again, this ideal represented an imagined perfection that not only reflected individual ideals but, more importantly, also encapsulated everyone's lack of shame. From another point of view, of course, this emotional model can also be seen as a social product, an expression of society's own symbolic desire for progress.

### 5.3. Surprise: The Climate of Hope in a New World

Surprise can be perceived as a transient emotion stemming from the breach of expectations or the realisation of something unexpected, often merging into fear, relief, or disgust. It can also be seen as a functional response that prompts an understanding of



what has happened [46,48] (p. 148), [65] (p. 551). But how does this particular emotion manifest in the so-called post-medieval New World atmosphere? Apparently, not only through the most obvious events, such as the ‘discovery’ of new lands by Westerners or the assimilation of new ideas by the population thanks to scientific advances, but also through less obvious events. These include new forms of mutual relations that shaped even their most basic social structures, such as the increasing possibilities of marital arrangements, as Giddens [66] (p. 38) points out in *The transformation of intimacy*.

Undoubtedly, after the Middle Ages, surprise seems to have become more intertwined with the lives of some social groups. Periodically, people as a society were surprised—whether by new ideas, mechanisms, or habits. However, although these new ideas were developed over a long period of time, a significant part of their outcomes seem to have materialised in a particularly short timeframe, namely the 18th and 19th centuries. While all of the above factors provided occasional surprises, it seems that during this short period, a wide range of surprises had a significant impact on ordinary citizens and began to shape their lives.

Notable events include, for example, the Industrial Revolution (beginning in the late 18th century), American Independence (late 18th century), and the French Revolution (late 18th century). Nevertheless, it was certainly not only these and other similarly impactful issues that dominated the conversations—and sensibilities—of ordinary citizens about the ‘new world’ unfolding around them. The ‘new ideas’ also played a key role. Consider, for example, the impact of the ‘new beginning’ proposed by Darwin in *The Origin of Species* in 1859 [67]. To a greater or lesser extent, as Nietzsche illustrates in *The Gay Science*, originally published in 1882, the common citizen was surprised by a ‘new social reality’ virtually overnight, wherein, metaphorically speaking, God had ceased to exist. He had been removed from the forefront of social dynamics and debates [24] (pp. 119, 120).

Moreover, unlike the atmosphere of fear prevalent in the Middle Ages, where fantasy was largely relegated to the realm of the invisible, it began to materialise as a tangible reality in people’s everyday lives. Things that are taken for granted today were not so in the late 18th and 19th centuries, but they began, somewhat surprisingly, to become part of people’s everyday experiences.

According to the book *1001 Inventions that Changed the World* [68] (pp. 230–501), the period spanning the late 18th century and the 19th century was marked by surprising innovations and discoveries that profoundly reshaped the established worldview. Enumerating them all would divert the focus of this study. Still, a small selection includes dentures (1791), gas lighting (1792), ambulances (1792), internal combustion engines (1794), semaphores (1794), corkscrews (1795), vaccinations (1796), batteries (1799), submarines (1800), locomotives (1804), municipal water treatments (1804), electric motors (1821), omnibuses (1826), photography (1826), revolvers (1835), artificial fertilisers (1839), fuel cells (1839), postage stamps (1840), gas-fired engines (1860), colour photography (1861), paper clips (1867), blue jeans (1873), telephones (1876), incubators (1880), public electricity supplies (1882), motorcycles (1885), motorcars (1886), diesel engines (1895), X-ray photography (1895), aspirin (1899), and many more.

This general atmosphere of surprise, fuelled by small, regular surprises, seemed to promise the transcendence of the old irrational world inhabited by myths, rites, and superstitions [69] (p. 119). It also fostered a belief in a grand final surprise: a new, modern, and truly just world. But has this vision truly materialised?

#### 5.4. Anger: Part of the Fuel for the Modern Dream

Anger, often related to hatred, arises from perceived injustices, real or imagined injuries, and frustrations. Recognised as the most dangerous emotion, it has the potential to trigger an aggressive response to discomfort with the aim of eliminating it [46,48,70] (p. 243). However, how could an atmosphere of anger have emerged in this New World, which, as mentioned in the previous section, seemed to promise the realisation of so many old dreams? It seems to be clear that this so-called New World was very much built under

a new social paradigm, recognised as capitalism [71–73]. A kind of new background music that not only led to a change in the rhythm of the general population but also to a climate of resistance among many individuals navigating this new atmosphere, as exemplified in the message of the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848.

To envision this social reality, we can imagine an exhausted person labouring under the weight of heavy sacks until they are finally liberated from their burden. Similarly, the Protestant territories experienced relief from the heavy burden of the Middle Ages, largely imposed by the Catholic Church. Nonetheless, the initial joy proved fleeting, if not entirely illusory. As these countries cast off one burden, they found themselves burdened anew with the development of production methods, marking the onset of what is called capitalism. The social fabric changed significantly, transitioning from agriculture to industry and causing mass migration to urban centres. The myriad occupations and outdoor lifestyles of rural communities gave way to the monotonous toil of urban workers. The transition from feudal serfdom to wage labour for the burgeoning middle class and the traditional barter system prompted the widespread use of currency. This transformative event, akin to the Big Bang, not only ushered in a new social order but also brought forth a new archetype: *homo economicus*. This new social model redirected allegiance from the church to the economic apparatus, driven solely by the pursuit of maximum profitability in wealth production. Yet, where does anger fit within a collective emotional identity?

Some of the critics at the time argued that this transformation led to the ‘loss’ of humanity and the alienation of the individual. They contended that while workers toiled tirelessly for wages that barely covered their needs, their labour continued to enrich an increasingly wealthy bourgeoisie. This meteorological reality sparked a general atmosphere of indignation among the proletarian sphere, culminating in violent actions and protests. So, what fundamental emotion seemed to unite these people? What was the ‘glue’ that held them together and made them want to act together? When Marx and Engels, in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, called for unity with the famous slogan “WORKINGMEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!” [74] (p. 116), it was certainly not a unity driven by emotions such as shame or happiness, although these emotions could certainly be present in smaller doses in these collectives for other reasons.

Indeed, it appears that their appeal was also—or perhaps primarily—a call for anger, urging the working classes worldwide to unite in resistance against the capitalist system and engage in the class struggle. It seems that it was not only a shared ideology that brought together many members of the working class at that time but also a shared anger that drove them to take action in this social climate, which was particularly ‘felt’ in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

### 5.5. Sadness: The Nature of Modernity Reality

Sadness, generally a reaction triggered by the loss of something real or symbolic, can vary in duration and intensity, often leading to a reduction in actions [46,48,70] (p. 243), [65] (p. 507). As for Modernity, despite the great debate, it can be understood as the post-Enlightenment period, encompassing secularisation, rationalisation, democratisation, and scientific thinking, with a focus on the SELF in the main social and human issues [75] (p. 314), [37] (p. 1125). So, what connection could there be between sadness and modernity, the period that theoretically promised a new blossoming of humanity and the world around it? Let us explore this further.

Contrary to our expectations, the ideals established in the 18th century did not materialise as expected. Instead of flourishing, society took a very different course. The prevailing conditions of war, destruction, disease, hatred, and violence created a new atmosphere devoid of the excitement and optimism of earlier times. As Latour [76] (p. 39) observed, the modern world has never transpired in the sense that it has never operated solely according to the rules of its official constitution. Modernity, guided by Enlightenment thought, was, as noted by Meneses [69] (p. 121), nothing more than an illusion. Or, as articulated by Martins [77] (p. 143), a dream—a dream that, over time, has turned into a nightmare.

Suddenly, reports began to circulate that everything believed up to that point made no sense: it had all been a “misunderstanding”, as Nietzsche [3] (p. 225) wrote at the time and as Darwin [78] (p. 386) also suggested. The common beliefs of the general population were dismissed as those of ‘mad’ people [24] (pp. 119, 120). In other words, the common people felt ‘robbed’—and their ideology was stolen—because their ‘old truth’, their ‘old beliefs’, started to fade away [79]. That not only led to a general loss of identity but also, above all, plunged society into deep melancholy.

Thus, what initially seemed to be an incredible and euphoric narrative gradually turned into a disheartening and haunting drama. The anticipated mood of ultimate exultation yielded an unavoidable and protracted state of melancholy. The notion of joyfully laughing ‘with’ modernity becomes illusory because, as Latour [76] asserted, “we have never been modern”. However, this very realisation provides the space to mock ‘Modernity’ for its many unfulfilled promises. According to Meneses [69] (p. 121), melancholy within modernity should not be seen as a sin but as inherent to its nature.

Although sadness may not have been initially accepted, over time—amidst the unfulfilled promises of modernity—it seems to have become the most fitting ‘social dress’ for the stormy weather of modernity. Gradually, it emerged as the most comfortable ‘garment’ for the emotional atmosphere. It was not the ideal or the model proposed for modernity, but it seemed to be the right outfit for living in the reality of modernity. It is reminiscent of people who swap their anticipated light attire intended for a summer’s day because, unexpectedly, a rainy, cold day descends upon them during the same season. The plan gives way to reality—in this case, emotional and social reality. Everyone, without exception, was forced to dance to this new rhythm: the rhythm of melancholy.

#### 5.6. *Happiness: A Postmodern Belief*

Happiness is undoubtedly one of the most debated topics in human history, and its interpretation depends on the social and temporal context. Therefore, in this study, it will *only* be defined as the attainment of a notable degree of satisfaction stemming from a certain ‘negotiation’ between the individual and society [46,48,65] (pp. 298–300). Postmodernity, another controversial term, refers to the period that has become increasingly prominent since the late 20th century. It is marked by the disruption, fragmentation, and blending of traditional and modern currents in the major social and human domains [75] (pp. 375, 376), [37] (p. 1128). How can postmodernity and the belief in one ‘new’ happiness be linked in a general emotional landscape?

According to Maffesoli, this era is marked by a ‘return’ to pleasure that permeates all areas of social life [80] (pp. 7,8). It is a social environment where individuals constantly seek to “lose themselves” [80] (p. 220), listening to the “voices of the flesh” [80] (p. 226) at all times. It is also, in the words of Maffesoli [81] (p. 84), a new social logic, a new rhythm where things are no longer dictated by strict purposes but by a newfound “sensible reason” fuelled by small pleasures, leading to “a slightly animal joy of living”. Lipovetsky [82] (p. 335) observed that kind of happiness “is no longer thought of as a wonderful future, but as a radiant present, an immediate and constantly renewed pleasure”. It is no longer anchored in a religious or ideological discourse that promotes happiness somewhere in the future, but rather in a new ethos summed up by the “new gospel: ‘buy, enjoy’” [82] (p. 102).

Cabanis and Illouz [83] suggested that happiness has become a ubiquitous promotion, effectively forming a kind of dictatorship—a dictatorship of visual happiness that requires validation from others to be recognised and approved within social circles. It is a general social climate in which happiness seems to have been reduced or confused with pleasure. Just like in other social and emotional contexts that have been discussed, this dictatorship compels the ‘I’ to feel more or less directly like the ‘we’. Again, the aim seems to be not only the general unity of the social body but also, above all, its stability in the pursuit of a common goal.



## 6. Main Discussion: Three Areas of Focus

### 6.1. *The Different Emotional Moods of Societies*

The historical perspective proposed in this study highlights that different emotional atmospheres have played different roles and displayed different intensities in different social contexts. Just as a person experiences a range of emotional states throughout a day or a lifetime, societies symbolically undergo an equally dynamic emotional trajectory. Just as a person can experience multiple emotions at the same time, societies seem to have experienced a range of emotions at the same time, even if one or another has been more visible or intense.

As suggested above, fear dominated the Middle Ages due to the ignorance of the population and was fuelled to serve the interests of the Church [58]. Over time, however, shame emerged as a social response to the need for progress, acting as a kind of ‘exit door’ out of the Dark Ages [32]. A climate of surprise, in turn, fed itself and also fuelled new discussions, discoveries, habits, and mechanisms [24,66–68]. Meanwhile, a climate of anger arose more or less simultaneously as a resistance to the new capitalist ‘rhythm’ [71–74]. These and other events caused modernity to fall into a state of melancholy, largely due to various frustrated expectations [69,76,77,79]. Over time, however, postmodernity ushered a new and incessant pursuit of pleasure, labelled as happiness, which once again became a kind of emotional model and social/visual obligation [80–83].

Aware of the inherent constraints of this proposal, which can vary depending on the perspective adopted, it is at least clear that certain emotions more or less define certain societies. However, this understanding alone does not elucidate how the ‘negotiation’ between overarching emotional atmospheres and their various individualities unfolds. The next topic will explore this in more detail.

### 6.2. *The Negotiation of Emotions in Society*

There is a certain parallel between the relationship between emotional climates and individuals and the correlation between someone’s choice of clothes and the weather. A person may choose an outfit based on what they think the weather conditions will be like, but those conditions are in no way shaped by the choices of one or more people. For example, who has never experienced the need to change their summer clothes to feel comfortable on a cool, rainy day that unexpectedly arrives in the same season? Similarly, the real emotional conditions we encounter do not always match individual or collective preferences or plans. Emotional climates are unpredictable and seem to cause many people to forsake their preferences or plans to accommodate the prevailing reality.

For example, in popular medieval stories, the archetype often depicted someone fearless, yet paradoxically, the population was completely immersed in fear [58]. Similarly, the post-medieval ideal was one of profound shame, but people seemed to lack it altogether [32]. Likewise, with the modern ideal promising ecstasy for all, the social reality instead imposed a pervasive melancholy [69,76,77]. These and other examples highlight that it is not the societal or ideological proposition that shapes the emotional atmosphere but rather the opposite—a conclusion that somehow echoes that of Elias [32]. Drawing from the example of religion, the author states that it is not the religious behaviour that controls the emotional climate but rather the emotional climate that controls religious behaviour: “[the] religion is always exactly as ‘civilized’ as the society or class which upholds it” [32] (p. 200). Thus, it points to the difference between the real emotional climate and the model proposed for social life. Ultimately, no single emotional model seems to resist, at least sustainably or comfortably, the prevailing real emotional reality.

However, there is an aspect of this dynamic between the proposed model and the actual atmosphere that cannot be overlooked. Often, we see a gradual reduction in this difference over time. For instance, in the historical proposal of this study, it was noted that medieval society has gradually overcome intense fear, post-medieval society has embraced more decorum, and the modern ideal has found greater solace in so-called postmodernity. This illustrates that models can move up the social hierarchy and gradually come to reflect

how the collective should feel. In other words, as Elias [32] (pp. 53, 54) suggested in relation to Erasmus' treatise, there were symptoms indicating that a new emotional climate was emerging, that something was different and changing. However, there is no way of predicting exactly 'how' or 'when' these climates will emerge and whether they will emerge under the conditions outlined—as indeed did not happen with the very foundational ideals of modern society [76].

Of course, when discussing emotions of a social nature, we are essentially addressing the 'regimes of feeling', emotional environments where collective emotions influence individual emotions. Symbolically, this seems to work like the invisible blood that circulates through the veins of a living body. In this sense, this shared feeling not only unites its members but also keeps the interests of this specific (social) body alive. However, non-adherence to a particular regime of feeling, in other words, not feeling the same as the established collective, often does not offer easy alternatives. As Durkheim [84] (p. 51) noted in another context: "each society is predisposed to contribute a definite quota of voluntary deaths". In this particular context, this means that we must either adapt to the regimes of feeling and learn to experience these emotions or are forced to do so, even if reluctantly. If we reject this regulation of feeling altogether, the social body loses interest in us, at least in theory. This synchronisation can not only transpire from an inheritance over time [32,85,86] but also from ephemeral social events, be they sports competitions, media shows, or something similar [29,80,81]. But the most interesting thing in both cases, whether it is a millenary legacy or something that is only a few hours old (like the official announcement of a war), is that it not only unites some people but also, above all, excludes everyone else, or at least makes them aware of their exclusion in the short, medium, or long term.

In this sense, it seems clear that when an individual or a collective fails to express, more or less directly, the emotions expected by the social body, something apparently inevitable occurs: a kind of social gangrene appears, which excludes it from the social body across various spheres, whether political, religious, economic, or of another kind. This exclusion could potentially be temporary if it decides to adapt at some point, or it could lead to its extinction if it persists in not feeling like the social body.

While it has been acknowledged that the fundamental institutions of a society or the prevailing ideologies of a particular period more or less consciously shape and feed these emotional climates, as we have seen previously, the Medieval Church used fear to its institutional advantage, and the Communist movement used anger to fuel its cause. Nevertheless, as the social-emotional climate changes, it is up to these singular ideologies or institutions to regulate their feel, at least outwardly, towards the larger social feel. This seems to be the only way to avoid extinction.

### 6.3. *The Emotional Life of Societies*

Drawing from the concepts outlined in the first part of this study [36–43], an analogy has been suggested that society can be compared to a 'final piece' of the puzzle, while culture is the 'glue' that holds the pieces together. Furthermore, through the historical lens presented in this study, it seems to have become equally clear that it is primarily through this 'glue' that the different emotions of societies are expressed. So, it seems that culture not only reflects an emotional climate but also feeds it. This dynamic can be observed across different historical periods, spanning from the fear that fuelled medieval stories to the images of pleasure that fuel the screens of (post)modern society [58,66]. However, does this suffice to posit that societies have emotions or a certain symbolic sensibility that can be equated or interpreted as such?

In the first part of this study, relying on various scholarly perspectives [17,46–50], the notion was put forward that emotion might be conceptualised as "the response, with a certain degree of automatism, of a body endowed with a discernible level of intelligence, to stimuli that influence the state of that body. Its primary, though not exclusive, purpose is to act in order to maintain the body's life or to make it more comfortable".

Given such a definition, it seems reasonable to assert that societies, from an obviously symbolic standpoint, appear to possess emotions in their way of life. It can be observed in various manifestations.

As noted earlier, during the Middle Ages, due to widespread ignorance, fear emerged as the most effective emotion for holding the body together. However, like a living body endowed with a discernible degree of intelligence, it had to evolve. It appears that shame played a crucial role in that evolution, aiding in transcending certain primitive instincts. The same phenomenon seems to have occurred with the emergence of various surprises in later periods, in different forms, further stimulating progress. The proletarian anger cannot be overlooked in this narrative, as the absence of which would have led to the collapse of society, or at least to a regression to feudal norms. On the other hand, melancholy appears as a natural response to the wars and atrocities of this time, providing an important moment of pause before the tremendous postmodern euphoria.

What happens when someone squeezes a balloon with their hands with a reasonable amount of force? One or more small areas will naturally expand between the fingers, preventing the structure from collapsing. That is the nature of the balloon. In the same way, societies, when squeezed by a certain 'foreign body', seem to emphasise certain areas of their nature symbolically. Certain emotions have always been there but have only become visible so that the structure does not collapse.

The emotional atmospheres of societies seem to reflect not only a shared set of values and ideas that define a common way of feeling at a particular time but also a common way of feeling that manifests itself through specific ideas and values. It does not appear to be a simple unidirectional dynamic but a complex interplay where both parts feed on each other. This complexity underscores the unity of the social body, akin to its symbolic blood or soul. So, it seems that it is mainly cultures that 'store' emotions in societies. But ultimately, it is the individual who uses them or not, which makes this whole variable extremely unpredictable.

## 7. Key Conclusions

This exploratory study, based on the author's historical (re)vision, inherently carries limitations, both in its perspective and, consequently, in its vision. Acknowledging the limitations inherent in a singular perspective, we humbly outline the eight primary conclusions of this analysis below, which aim to make a modest contribution to the complex discussion surrounding the correlation between specific emotions in specific societies.

1. Throughout history, societies have experienced different emotional atmospheres, sometimes simultaneously;
2. These emotional atmospheres are not static; on the contrary, they are dynamic and subjected to various influences;
3. Although societies generally propose an emotional model to be followed, the reality does not always conform to it;
4. Societies may gradually converge towards the proposed model over time, but this is not guaranteed and can be a slow and complex process;
5. Dominant institutions and ideologies have the power to influence emotional atmospheres, but they must also adapt to emotional changes to remain relevant;
6. Culture can be thought of as the 'glue' that holds society together, and collective emotions are an essential part of this cohesion;
7. From a symbolic perspective, societies can be seen as having emotions that influence their behaviour and development;
8. Under pressure, societies show certain emotions, just as a balloon, when squeezed, emphasises certain areas in order to adapt its body and prevent it from collapsing.

In conclusion, this study suggests that societies have a symbolic emotional essence, reflected notably through culture. These overarching emotional atmospheres, like the invisible blood in a body, serve three primary functions: (1) maintaining cohesion within the social body; (2) facilitating its evolution; and (3) staving off or averting its disintegration.

## 8. Limitations

Although this study offers a perspective on the symbolic emotional lives of societies and how collective emotional atmospheres influence social dynamics, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The analysis focused primarily on Western societies and a selection of emotions that, while comprehensive, do not fully capture the complexity of the human emotional spectrum and its collective manifestations. Furthermore, the exploratory nature of this work means that interpretations are provisional and subjected to revision as new research emerges.

Future research could focus more narrowly on particular places or periods. Another important direction for future research could be to adopt interdisciplinary methodologies that combine documentary analyses with questionnaires, big data analysis, etc. It is also crucial that future research relies less on social perceptions and more on empirical data that can more accurately capture these general emotional trends in societies (which now have an increasingly digital but equally emotional dimension).

By studying these real and symbolic emotions in a more regular and varied way, we can begin to unravel not only how societies ‘feel’ but also how these emotions shape, sustain, or transform complex social structures over time.

Although this exercise is a very small step, it is hoped that it will stimulate new studies aimed at a better understanding of who we are as interdependent beings in tune with a higher emotional structure. This is no small goal, as it depends entirely on a greater scientific focus on the subject.

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