

The Social Atmospheres of the Imaginary

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Abstract

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This article proposes treating the notions of atmosphere and imaginary, despite their apparent conceptual evanescence, as analytical tools capable of grasping together the sensible and the symbolic dimensions of associated life. It aims to move beyond sociocentrism to explore what we call the dark matter of social facts: the perceptual-symbolic sphere that orients collective experience before conscious deliberation. Drawing on the atmospheric turn of German neophenomenology and its sociological translation in Robert Gugutzer's Neophenomenological Sociology, the article rereads the classics of the discipline as anticipators of a dispersed and unnamed proto-atmospheric web and then turns to contemporary sociology to ground the analytical dimensions and sociological definition of social atmosphere. Its original theoretical contribution lies in distinguishing between imaginative atmospheres, situated configurations in which feeling and imagining are attuned among co-present bodies in the here and now of the reciprocal action, and the *atmospheric imaginary*, the capacity of symbolic and cultural forms to objectify themselves and radiate sensibly into environments, thereby predisposing new atmospheres. By recomposing the Castoriadian instituting/instituted polarity and the grammar of the Durandian regimes within Simmel's sociological aesthetics, the article demonstrates the dynamic circularity between feeling and imagining, opening an empirical agenda for a sociology of the atmospheres of the imaginary.

Keywords

Modernity Social Atmosphere | Imaginary | Neophenomenological Sociology; Hermann Schmitz | Georg Simmel

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The ideal would be to understand that every factual element is already theory. The blue of the sky reveals the fundamental law of chromatics. Above all, let us seek nothing behind the phenomena: they themselves are the theory.

Goethe J. W. (1833)

Introduction



17

At first sight, the concept of atmosphere and the imaginary seem unlikely candidates for rigorous sociological analysis. Both carry a certain conceptual evanescence. "Atmosphere" derived from the Greek *atmós* (vapour, exhalation) and *sphaîra* (sphere), originally denotes the gaseous volume surrounding the Earth. "Imaginary," by contrast, derives from the Latin *imago* and evokes the image as shadow, appearance, or phantasm. The aim of this article is therefore to develop atmosphere and the imaginary as complementary analytical categories for grasping the sensible and symbolic dimensions of social life. This approach moves beyond sociocentrism by directing attention to what we call the dark matter of social facts: the perceptual-symbolic sphere that qualifies, differentiates, and shapes the space-time of interaction, and thereby contributes to the production of shared meaning. Rather than treating this sphere as an epiphenomenon of social structures or as a secondary expression of explicitly articulated meanings, we examine it as a constructive dimension of social experience. The argument proceeds in two stages. First, we establish the theoretical basis for a sociological understanding of atmosphere. We then place this concept in dialogue with theories of the historical-social imaginary to explain how sensible experience and symbolic form become mutually constitutive. That this conceptual evanescence constitutes a genuine sociological problem, rather than merely a rhetorical pretext, becomes apparent when we consider the discipline's uneven treatment of the sensible dimension of social life. The problem is not that sociology has ignored shared feeling altogether. On the contrary, attention to collective sentiment, environmental tonality, bodily disposition, and the affective character of interaction can be found throughout the sociological tradition. Durkheim's analysis of collective effervescence, Simmel's attention to sociability and the sensory dimensions of interaction, and later work by Goffman, Collins, and Hochschild all demonstrate that social life is never exhausted by explicit norms, meanings, or structures. What remains insufficiently developed, however, is a common conceptual vocabulary for bringing these observations together. The atmospheric dimension has repeatedly been encountered but rarely consolidated as an analytical object in its own right. It has instead tended to appear indirectly, subordinated to explanatory frameworks centered on structure norms, collective representations, interaction, or emotion. The issue, therefore, is less one of



repression than of theoretical fragmentation. Sociology has repeatedly registered the sensible dimension of associated life without fully theorizing the conditions under which it acquires form, becomes socially shared, and enters into the reproduction or transformation of social relations. The present article responds to this fragmentation by restoring the affective and perceptual register to a more central position within sociological analysis. Its proposition is not that atmosphere should replace existing sociological categories, but that it can illuminate a dimension of social processes that those categories do not fully capture.

The attempt to place atmosphere at the center of sociological analysis nevertheless creates a theoretical difficulty. Taken in isolation, atmosphere can become detached from the historical and social processes through which particular atmospheres emerge. Neophenomenological approaches are especially valuable for describing how an atmosphere is experienced as an affective quality that exceeds the individual subject, but description alone does not explain why a given atmosphere takes a particular form, how it becomes historically sedimented, or which social forces reproduce or transform it. The opposite problem arises with the imaginary. When detached from embodied and sensible experience, the imaginary can be reduced to a system of representations—a repertoire of myths, symbols, narratives, and cultural meanings whose organization can be analyzed without adequately accounting for the bodily and affective processes through which those meanings are experienced. The theoretical proposition advanced here as follows from this double limitation: atmosphere and the imaginary must be analyzed relationally rather than independently. The imaginary provides atmospheric experience with symbolic form, historical depth, and direction while atmosphere gives the imaginary bodily presence and affective force. The relationship is therefore not one of simple determination in either direction. Symbolic and cultural forms can predispose particular ways of feeling and experiencing an environment, while atmospheres generated through social interaction can, in turn, reinforce, transform, or generate new symbolic forms. Feeling and imagining are thus treated here as mutually constitutive dimensions of the same social process. This relational proposition leads to the article's central conceptual distinction: "imaginative atmospheres and atmospheric imaginary". By *imaginative atmospheres*, we mean situated configurations in which feeling and imagining become attuned among co-present bodies in the here and now of interaction. The emotional intensity of a funeral, the euphoria of a crowd, and the intimacy of a conversation are examples of such configurations. They are ephemeral and relational: they emerge through embodied encounters and are sustained through the reciprocal attunement of those who participate in them. By *atmospheric imaginary*, we mean the capacity of symbolic and cultural forms (architecture, objects, rituals, styles, narratives and other material or symbolic arrangements) to objectify and stabilize affective meanings and to radiate them into environments. Such forms can persist beyond the immediate interaction and predispose subsequent actors toward particular atmospheric experiences. The distinction does not establish a hierarchy between the two concepts. Rather, it identifies a circular process. Atmospheric experience can



sediment into cultural forms, while existing cultural forms can predispose the emergence of particular atmospheres. An atmosphere may therefore become the experimental matrix from which new images, symbols, practices, or narratives emerge, just as established forms of imaginary may organize the conditions under which an atmosphere becomes possible. This recursive movement between life experience and symbolic form is central to the argument developed throughout the article. It is also where the relationship between the sensible and the symbolic becomes sociologically consequential: neither exists as an autonomous domain, because each continually enters into the formation of the other.

The distinction is what we call the dark matter of social facts: the perceptual-symbolic dimension of social life that is neither reducible to objective structures nor exhausted by explicitly articulated meanings. This dimension is difficult to observe directly because it operates largely through embodied perception, affective attunement, environmental qualities, and symbolic predispositions. Yet its effects are consequential. It influences how situations are experienced, how bodies become attuned to one another, how spaces acquire particular qualities, and how meanings become affectively compelling before they are consciously formulated. In this sense, the analogy with dark matter is heuristic: just as dark matter is inferred through its effects rather than directly observed, the perceptual-symbolic dimension of social life can be approached through the atmospheric effects it produces. Atmospheres can therefore be understood as sensible manifestations of this otherwise difficult-to-grasp dimension of social life. In Schmitz's terminology, they are *quasi-things*; neither wholly subjective states nor wholly objective properties, but affective qualities that are experienced as distributed within situations and environments. The imaginary, meanwhile, provides a symbolic grammar through which these qualities can be organized, stabilized, and transformed. The dark matter of social facts thus names not a hidden substance behind social reality but a relational field in which perception, affect, embodiment, and symbolic form intersect. To develop this argument, the article proceeds through several stages. We first reconstruct the atmospheric turn in German neophenomenology, focusing on Bollnow, Schmitz, Böhme, and Griffero, and examine its sociological translation in Robert Guggenberger's Neophenomenological Sociology. This establishes the conceptual vocabulary required for the subsequent argument. We then return to the classical sociological tradition and identify in Marx, Tocqueville, Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel a dispersed proto-atmospheric sensibility that, although not formulated as a theory of atmosphere, anticipates several of its central concerns. The discussion then moves to contemporary sociology, particularly the work of Goffman, Collins, Hochschild, Bourdieu, Maffesoli, Latour and Sloterdijk, as well as the Anglo-American affective turn, in order to trace the conceptual resources available for developing a specifically sociological account of atmosphere. The final stage returns to Simmel, whose sociological aesthetics provides a particularly productive framework for bringing together the two concepts developed here. By placing Simmel in dialogue with Castoriadis's distinction between the instituting and instituted imaginary and Durand's regimes of the imaginary, we develop an account of reciprocal movement between

imaginative atmospheres and atmospheric imaginary. The article ultimately argues that this movement between lived feeling and symbolic form is not peripheral to social life but constitutive of it. On this basis, it proposes an empirical agenda for examining how atmospheres of the imaginary are produced, stabilized, transformed, and contested in concrete social settings.

1. Neophenomenology and the Atmospheric Turn

To trace the genealogy of the atmospheric paradigm, we must begin with philosophical premises that prefigure it, particularly the contribution of Otto Friedrich Bollnow. This German philosopher, working within phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions, developed the notion of *Stimmung*, elaborated by Martin Heidegger (1927) as the original affective tonality of being-in-the-world. Whereas anxiety in Heidegger constitutes the fundamental affective tonality through which existence is disclosed in its radical openness to the world, Bollnow treats it as only one possible form of the subject's attunement to lived space. Other vital currents also root the subject in the world. Bollnow identifies, "to give a provisional example, the emotional tonalities of cheerfulness [*Fröhlichkeit*] and sadness [*Traurigkeit*], of gaiety [*Lustigkeit*] and exuberance [*Ausgelassenheit*], as well as those of dejection [*Niedergeschlagenheit*] and apathetic depression [*dumpfe Benommenheit*], of tranquility [*ruhige Entspanntheit*], of anxiety [*Angst*] and of preoccupation [*Besorgtheit*]" (Bollnow 1956, our trans: 26). Thus, we move from an affective universe dominated by anxiety to a pluriverse of affective tonalities (*Stimmungen*). This framework also accommodates feelings that, unlike affective tonalities, always refer intentionally to an object external to the psyche: "every joy is joy over something (and over something determinate), every hope is hope for something, every love is love for something, every aversion is aversion to something, and so on" (ibidem: 26–27). Affective tonality therefore does not possess a thing-like nature but constitutes the basso continuo in which existence resonates as a whole.

The so-called *affective* or *atmospheric turn* (Schmitz 2009; Böhme 2010; Griffero 2010) emerged from this philosophical development within German neophenomenology. At its core is an attempt to displace psychocentrism as the exclusive framework for understanding affective experience by recognizing atmospheres as irreducible to either emotional tonalities or feelings intentionally directed toward an object. Beyond states of mind located within psychic life, atmospheric environments shape perceptual surroundings through determinate spatial tonalities and thereby predispose the affective disposition of those immersed in them. In a church, for example, the atmospheric is produced through the penumbra, the height of the nave, the echo of the sounds, the smell of incense, the light filtered through the stained-glass windows, and the arrangement of gilded surfaces and frescoes. These sensible qualities generate an atmosphere of solemn recollection, architectural grandeur, and elevation that affects those who enter the space.



If the atmospheric designates the ensemble of sensible, spatial, material, and perceptual qualities that configure a field of resonance outside the ego, presenting itself as "something that stands rather on the side of things" (Böhme 2010: 82), atmosphere emerges between an external pole, radiated by a particular atmospheric context, and an internal pole, tied to the egological dimension of the subject. It is neither an "inner feeling" nor an "external environment," but an intermediate sphere encompassing subject and object, body and space, inner and outer, existence and world. In this sense, atmosphere is an affectively charged dimension that, even before being conceptualized, transforms topological space into an existential place or, in Hermann Schmitz's terms, a "surfaceless space within the domain of that whose presence one lives" (Schmitz 2009: 99).

Its concreteness becomes particularly evident when we enter an atmosphere and are immediately affected by it, as in the somberness of a funeral, the festivity of a gathering of friends, or the collective electricity of a sporting or musical event. Gernot Böhme describes these as "experiences of ingression" (ibidem: 83), contrasting them with "experiences of discrepancy" (ibidem: 84), which occur when the intensity of our inner state prevents us from attuning to the atmospheric surroundings in which we are immersed. Ingression and discrepancy bring into focus the active role of the "own-body" (Schmitz 2009: 55), that is, the lived body (*Leib*) as one's own, distinct from the anatomical body (*Körper*) and characterized by the vital dynamic of contraction and expansion. Contraction distances the body from its atmospheric context, whereas dilation involves it in that context's affective texture. The own-body thus becomes a co-constitutive element through which the atmospheric becomes atmosphere: an existential space capable of affecting the subject, modifying its state of mind, and orienting its action. Consider, for example, a livid sky that is experienced as a melancholic tonality and leads us to go outside. It is precisely this perceptual-factual character that makes atmosphere a *quasi-thing*: a perceptual sphere in which an effused, supra-subjective and supra-objective feeling is gathered, reducible neither to metaphor nor to a simple mental projection onto space. Rather, it "always means co-perceiving (pre-categorially, synaesthetically, kinaesthetically) one's own affective own-bodily situation and ascertaining how one feels in a certain place through a bilateral perception that has nothing metaphorical about it" (ibidem: 119). Neophenomenology, then, is a research orientation that renews attention to the lived experience of being-in-the-world, which Schmitz (2009: 38) argues has been obscured by three constitutive elements of Western thought: classical philosophical ontology, medieval theology, and modern science. The atmospheric paradigm responds to this neglect by proposing philosophical reflection on the emotional configurations of the environments in which human beings are immersed and on how these configurations, by resisting full conceptualization, continually attune them to their surrounding.

2. Atmosphere and Neophenomenological Sociology



From the early 2000s, Robert Gugutzer, professor of social sciences of sport at the Goethe University of Frankfurt, began translating Schmitz's philosophical categories into sociological analysis, developing a research program that grounds the intelligibility of the social not primarily in the rational and intentional actions of subjects but in affective own-bodily involvement, or *affektives Betroffensein*, understood as a structural a priori of sociality itself (Gugutzer 2017; 2022; 2023).

The starting assumption of Neophenomenological Sociology (NPS) is radically anti-Cartesian: the social does not originate primarily in conscious subjects endowed with instrumental reason and capable of strategic calculation but emerges from a pre-reflective, embodied substratum in which the lived body (*Leib*) constitutes the original site of encounter with the world and with others (Schmitz 2009). NPS therefore does more than integrate corporeality into sociological analysis, as in other *embodiment-oriented* traditions (Csordas 1994; Crossley 2001; Shilling 2003). It assigns the own-body an ontological and genetic priority over reflexivity and conscious intentionality.

One of the most significant contributions of NPS is its reformulation of the social agent. Social action is not conceived exclusively as intentional and teleologically oriented, as is the prevailing Weberian paradigm; it also possesses, and perhaps primarily, a pathic dimension. It is the action of a subject who undergoes, is moved, and responds to pre-reflective affective solicitations before being able to thematize them reflexively. The theoretical figure embodying this passive pole of action is the *patheur*, a concept developed within the Italian phenomenological tradition by Aldo Masullo (2003) and adopted in a sociological context by Gugutzer (2023). The term designates the agent insofar as it receives affective dynamics that precede and traverse it without having deliberately chosen them.

This pathic conception of action is articulated with a redefinition of sociality as own-bodily communication. From the NPS perspective, the social is not primarily a system of shared meanings, internalized norms, or reciprocal expectations, but a dynamic of mutual incorporation among human and non-human entities that involve, attract, repel, attune to, or conflict with one another through the own-body (Schmitz 2009; Uzarewicz 2011). Mutual incorporation may be antagonistic or solidaristic and does not necessarily presuppose conscious subjects: the entities involved include objects, spaces, atmospheres, rituals, norms, and other elements capable of exerting affective influence on the lived body. A further defining element is the conception of the lifeworld as an ensemble of atmospherically connoted situations. In Gugutzer's sociological rereading of Schmitz, every situation is a configuration of states of affairs, programs, and problems that does not present itself to the subject neutrally but reaches it through an impressive significance: a relevance that imposes itself before deliberation, selectively orients attention, and motivates action in a diffuse and pervasive manner (Schmitz 2005; 2009; Gugutzer 2017; 2023). The concept of multisituationality describes the contemporary condition in which individuals are simultaneously exposed to several atmospherically connoted situations that may be in tension or conflict, generating friction and, consequently, specific social effects. On the plane of intellectual filiations, NPS stands in a critical





and transformative relationship to the Husserlian phenomenological tradition. Whereas Husserl places the intentional consciousness of the transcendental subject at the center of analysis, NPS, following Schmitz's critique of Western philosophical interiorism, shifts the center of gravity from the conscious subject to the own-body. Subjectivity is no longer understood as a pole of meaning constitution but as a subjective state of affairs: a situational configuration in which the self finds itself involved without having deliberately chosen it and which defines it through the affective quality of its encounter with the world. A particularly important theoretical consequence concerns the status of emotions. Contrary to the internalist conception dominant in psychology and in much of the sociology of emotions (Hochschild 1983; Turner & Stets 2005), NPS, following Schmitz, attributes ontological autonomy to emotions as atmospheres external to the subject. As noted above, emotions are not interior psychic states that subjects project onto the world but affective configurations that exist in lived space and are grasped or undergone by the own-body through situational involvement (Schmitz 1969; Gugutzer 2023; Griffero 2010). This shift from the interiority to the exteriority of emotions has significant implications for the analysis of collective phenomena, from ritual solidarity and group dynamics to festive contexts and sporting experiences (Gugutzer 2017; Anderson 2009). A further distinctive feature of NPS is its extension of sociological analysis beyond the conscious human subject. In dialogue with Uzarewicz's (2011) transhuman sociology, NPS includes nonhuman and prepersonal entities (animals, objects, architectural spaces, and technical artifacts) within the social field insofar as they participate in the dynamics of mutual incorporation that constitute social life. This opening anticipates questions central to actor-network theories and posthuman relational ontologies (Bennett 2010; Braidotti 2013), while retaining a specifically phenomenological foundation in Schmitz's concept of the own-body.

3. The Concept of Atmosphere in the Classics of Sociology

One of the least explored yet most pervasive aspects of classical sociological is the recurrence, in the works of its founders, of theoretical configurations that can be understood through what we define here as *social atmosphere*: a diffuse affective quality, situationally connoted and corporeally perceived, that orients action and structures collective sensibility beyond conscious rational elaboration (Böhme 1995; 2017; Griffero 2010; Anderson 2009, 2014). Marx, Tocqueville, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel differed profoundly in their epistemological premises and theoretical programs, yet they converge in recognizing, in different ways and with different vocabularies, that the social can not be reduced to its normative, structural, or rational dimensions. Social life also possesses an affective and situational density that imposes itself on bodies and sensibilities before deliberation.

Durkheim's collective effervescence, Simmel's landscape and metropolitan *Stimmung*, Marx's reifying commodity fetishism, Tocqueville's *mœurs*, and Weber's analysis of the enchantment and disenchantment of the world can, on closer



inspection, be read as attempts to name and analyze situational qualities that exceed the categories through which each author constructed his theoretical apparatus. Their recurrence suggests a transversal, proto-atmospheric concern within the classical tradition and invites reflection on sociology's contribution to the neophenomenological study of social atmospheres. The aim is not to project anachronistically onto these works a vocabulary they did not possess, but to undertake a retrospective and comparative reading (Joas & Knöbl 2009) that identifies, in the founding texts of the discipline, conceptual nuclei in which a sociology of atmosphere may be said to have been latent. Before examining this tradition, however, a methodological precaution is necessary. The rereadings that follow are explicitly retrospective interpretations: they apply to authors who did not possess the concept of atmosphere as an analytical framework developed much later. None of the classical sociologists discussed here theorized their work in terms of social atmospheres, and attributing such a theory to them would be anachronistic. Our claim is narrower and, we believe, more defensible: their texts contain descriptions, categories, and intuitions that, when reconsidered through the atmospheric paradigm, reveal a subterranean coherence and unexpected analytical potential. Thus, when we speak of exchange value as an atmospheric quality, *mœurs* as institutionalized atmospheres, or disenchantment as atmospheric impoverishment, we are not claiming that these formulations are already present in the classical texts. Rather, we are proposing translations; hermeneutic operations for which we assume responsibility and whose validity should be judged by their capacity to illuminate rather than by their philological fidelity.

3.1 Three Proto-Atmospheric Configurations: Marx, Tocqueville, Weber

Three classics (Marx, Tocqueville, and Weber) allow us to identify three ways in which a supra-individual affective configuration can be produced and imposed, although none possessed the concept of atmosphere and each subordinated the phenomenon to its own explanatory logic. We therefore treat them jointly as three variants of the same problem rather than as successive stages.

In Marx, the affective configuration is above all a structural effect of production. The chapter on commodity fetishism (Marx 1867) describes objects that appear to radiate a force of their own, imposing themselves on agents pre-reflectively. We propose to read this phenomenal description, not as Marx's own conceptualization, but as a quasi-atmospheric quality of exchange value (Žižek 1989; Postone 1993), useful for illuminating contemporary atmospheric machines of consumption (Böhme 2017; Julmi 2017). Marx describes a phenomenon in which products of human labor assume an autonomous and mysterious form within which the capitalist economy: commodities appear to possess qualities of their own, an independent life, and reciprocal relations that seem natural and objective, although they are actually products of historically determined social relations (Žižek 1989; Postone 1993). In embryonic form, this can be related to Schmitz's neophenomenological category of *quasi-thing* (*Halbding*) (Schmitz 1978; 2014; Griffero 2014): the commodity appears to





absorb affective and relational qualities that exceed its physical properties, radiating a force of attraction and orientation that imposes itself on agents pre-reflectively and allowing it to participate in social life as though endowed with agency. For Marx, however, fetishism is an illusion to be dispelled rather than a reality to be thematized. His contribution can therefore be read as a critique of the social genesis of atmospheres: of how particular tonalities are produced, maintained, and contested through economic structures.

In Tocqueville, the same affective quality appears instead as institutionalized. *Mœurs*, the habits of the heart and dispositions felt before they are thought (Bellah et al. 1985), constitute the prepolitical substratum that sustains or dissolves democracy and can be read as atmospheres sedimented in local assemblies, associations, and jury courts (Manent 1982; Putnam 2000). Whereas Marx looks to production, Tocqueville looks to institutional reproduction: democratic tonality persists not because it is consciously chosen but because it is breathed. When the *mœurs* weaken, individualism erodes associative bonds, mild despotism replaces participation with dependence, or the passion for equality degenerates into envious leveling, what changes is not initially the formal institutional structure but the atmospheric quality of collective life. An atmosphere of solidarity and reciprocal involvement gives way to one of isolation, passivity, and affective compression, gradually and pre-reflectively imposing itself without citizens being able to identify precisely when and how their own diminishment occurred. In Schmitzian terms, this involves the transformation of *solidary atmospheres* into *antagonistic* ones, progressively compressing the own-body's capacity for expansion (Schmitz 2014; Gugutzer 2023). Here, too, however, the atmosphere remains instrumental: it is analyzed as a function of the resilience of the political order rather than as an autonomous reality.

Finally, in Weber, the affective dimension emerges through the tension between rationalization and affective density. Charisma involves immediate affective participation that can be interpreted as a relational atmosphere condensed around a figure (Griffero 2014; Riedel 2019). *Entzauberung* represents its negative counterpart and can be reread as the atmospheric impoverishment of rationalized life (Han 2013; Rosa 2016), provided that this remains a metaphorical interpretation rather than a claim about Weber's own argument: Weber was concerned with the rationalization of domination, not with a "pollution" of feeling. The famous image of the iron cage (*stahlhartes Gehäuse*) nevertheless possesses a quasi-phenomenological valence, describing an atmosphere of constriction, affective grayness, and bodily compression that is more than a rhetorical metaphor. It designates a situational quality through which Weber captures a constitutive tension of modernity. On the one hand, Weber is the theorist par excellence of modern rationalization and action oriented toward ends and values, a framework in which affective and corporeal dimensions tend to become residual factors of social action. On the other hand, his work demonstrates a sensitivity to the affective density of religious, aesthetic, and political contexts, suggesting that modernity cannot be fully explained through a rationalist paradigm alone. Taken together, these three thinkers delineate three faces of the same object:

atmosphere as an effect of structure (Marx), institutional sediment (Tocqueville), and a stake of disenchanted modernity (Weber). They thus anticipate three questions that a definition of social atmosphere must address: how an atmosphere is produced, how it is reproduced, and at what historical scale it operates. Durkheim and Simmel, however, take the decisive step from questions of genesis and function toward questions of mechanism and form.

3.2 Émile Durkheim: Collective Effervescence as an Atmospheric Paradigm

At first glance, Émile Durkheim appears far removed from the conceptual universe of neophenomenology. A positivist and methodological anti-psychologist, he founded a sociology that sought to treat social facts as "things" subject to external analysis (Durkheim 1895). Yet his writings, particularly those on religion and rituals, contain some of the classical tradition's most powerful proto-atmospheric descriptions (Pickering 1984; Alexander 1990; Fields 1995).

The affinities between Durkheim's work and the concept of atmosphere are most evident in *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Durkheim 1912), his mature study of religion based on Australian totemism. At the center of this work is the concept of collective effervescence (*effervescence collective*), arguably the Durkheimian notion closest to what we define here as atmosphere (Shilling & Mellor 1998; Tiryakian 1995). Durkheim describes collective effervescence as a condition generated in ritual assemblies when the density of interaction reaches a critical threshold: bodies draw near, movements synchronize, voices merge, and a diffuse affective quality emerges that simultaneously and involuntarily transforms participants' perceptions and experience. This affective quality belongs to no individual in particular; it is a supra-individual reality generated within the assembly that spreads among the bodies present, involving and transforming them before conscious elaboration.

From a Schmitzian perspective, Durkheimian collective effervescence can be read as a ritual atmosphere: an affective configuration situated in space and generated by the corporeal density of the assembly, which imposes itself on participants pre-reflectively and involuntarily, orienting their affective expansion and modifying their perceptual qualia (Riedel 2019; Slaby & von Scheve 2019). What Durkheim calls the force of the sacred (the power that participants experience as external and superior to themselves) can, in this proto-atmospheric rereading, be understood as the force of a collective atmosphere that bodies jointly produce and then perceive as external to each individual. The Durkheimian description is particularly relevant because it emphasizes the corporeal and spatial dimension of effervescence. It is not simply a communion of ideas or values but an affective contagion transmitted through the physical proximity of bodies, shared rhythms of movement, and the sonic and visual qualities of the assembly (Maffesoli 1988; Shilling 2008). This emphasis on the corporeal and situational materiality of religious phenomena anticipates the Schmitzian thesis that atmospheres condense and radiate through concrete



situational elements (spaces, objects, rituals, and rhythms) that function as vectors and anchoring poles of collective affective force.

A second point of affinity lies in Durkheim's distinction between the sacred and the profane as a structural principle of religious life. For Durkheim, the sacred is not an intrinsic property of objects or places but an affective quality that the collectivity confers and projects on particular elements of a situation through rituals: the totem, place of worship, and consecrated object are sacred not because of their physical properties but because they become material supports for a collective force that transcends them (Durkheim 1912; Bellah 2011).

Through the lens of social atmosphere, this structure describes the process of anchoring identified by Schmitz: atmospheres condense around certain elements of a situation—objects, places, figures, and rituals; that become their vectors and sources of radiation (Schmitz 2014; Griffero 2014). The Durkheimian totem can therefore be understood, in Schmitzian terms, as a pole of atmospheric condensation: a situational element in which collective affective force thickens and radiates. The sacred, as a sociological category, thus has a structure formally analogous to that of atmosphere: it is an affective reality external to the individual, irreducible to the physical properties of its material supports, and endowed with its own coercive and orienting force.

The difference from Schmitz is epistemological. For Durkheim, the sacred is a collective representation; a symbolic construction of the collectivity projected onto and subsequently experienced as external (Rawls 2004). For Schmitz, by contrast, atmospheres are ontologically autonomous and precede symbolic construction. The two perspectives therefore differ in their ontological commitments even though they identify formally analogous structures.

Durkheim's theory of rituals contains a further proto-atmospheric dimension. In collective rituals, bodies synchronize through shared movement (song, dance, and choral recitation) producing a form of solidarity that passes through the body before consciousness (Durkheim 1912; Goffman 1967; Collins 2004). Participants do not need to deliberate about whether to demonstrate solidarity; it is produced through corporeal synchronization as an effect of ritual participation.

Durkheim's sociology of rituals thus describes a mechanism through which collective atmospheres are produced through corporeal synchronization: ritual generates, maintains, and renews the atmospheres that hold the collectivity together. This Durkheimian line was taken up and developed by Randall Collins (2004) in his theory of *Interaction Ritual Chains*, which identifies emotional contagion in interaction rituals as a fundamental mechanism of social solidarity. Collins can therefore be seen as a mediator between Durkheim and NPS, although his framework remains predominantly microsociological and does not develop a phenomenological theory of the own-body (Gugutzer 2017).

A third, more speculative area of convergence concerns Durkheim's concept of collective consciousness (*conscience collective*). Durkheim defines it as the ensemble of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society, constituting a determinate system with a life of its own, distinct from and superior to individual



consciousnesses (Durkheim 1893). Collective consciousness is therefore not the sum of individual consciousnesses but a *sui generis* reality that transcends and orients them.

Reread through the categories of neophenomenology, Durkheimian collective consciousness presents a structure formally analogous to that which Schmitz attributes to atmospheres: it is a supra-individual reality, external to each subject and endowed with an orienting force of its own, imposing itself on individuals as something that precedes and constitutes them. The fundamental difference is that Durkheim conceives collective consciousness primarily in cognitive and normative terms, as an ensemble of shared representations and sentiments, whereas atmospheres are primarily affective and corporeal. In both cases, however, a supra-individual reality precedes and orients the subject without being reducible to the sum of its individual parts.

Durkheim's contribution to the proto-atmospheric genealogy of sociality is therefore phenomenologically rich. He identifies and describes ritual atmospheres with a lucidity that remains significant, grasping their supra-individual structure and coercive force while reconstructing their corporeal and situational production and their capacity to shape collective experience before it is translated into representation. Collective effervescence, in particular, anticipates what contemporary phenomenology would later theorize as atmospheric power: the generation of a diffuse affective quality that invests bodies, orients conduct, and produces cohesion without conscious deliberation (Anderson 2009; Riedel 2019).

The enduring value of the Durkheimian legacy lies precisely in this descriptive richness, even though his broader theoretical framework does not fully thematize the specific affective status of these phenomena. The concept of social atmosphere can therefore extend the Durkheimian insight by recognizing collective effervescence not only as a mechanism for producing symbolic solidarity but also as a paradigmatic manifestation of what atmospheres do to bodies and situations: transform them, orient them, and hold them together before and beyond conscious agreement. From this perspective, Durkheim does not merely anticipate the notion of social atmosphere: he provides one of its empirical and descriptive points of reference.

3.3. Georg Simmel as the Threshold of Atmospheric Sociology

Georg Simmel is the classical sociologist who most extensively thematized the aesthetic, sensory, and affective dimensions of social life (Frisby 1981, 2001; Levine 1971; Pyyhtinen 2018). His sociology begins neither with rational action nor within the system, but with form as the category organizing the vital flux of interaction, and with *Wechselwirkung*, or reciprocal interaction, as the elementary unit of the social (Simmel 1908; Cantó-Milà 2005). Within this framework, the affective and sensory dimensions are not irrational residues to be explained but constitutive elements of sociality itself. Simmel never uses *Atmosphäre* as a systematically elaborated technical category. Nevertheless, his work can be read as a phenomenology of social atmospheres *ante litteram*: he describes the diffuse affective quality of environments,



the emotional tonality of urban situations, the sensory density of encounters, the orienting force of spaces, and the rhythms of collective life (Wolff 1950; Frisby 1992). The affinities with Schmitz and NPS are significant precisely because they derive not from direct influence but from an independent convergence on analogous problems.

The affinities with the concept of atmosphere emerge particularly clearly in the essay *Philosophie der Landschaft* (Simmel 1913), where Simmel develops a theory of landscape *Stimmung* that anticipates several fundamental Schmitzian theses.

What is theoretically relevant is that Simmel does not reduce *Stimmung* to a subjective projection: it possesses a consistency of its own, a force independent of the perceiver's will. In Schmitzian terms, this can be read as a *quasi-thing*: an affective reality that is neither purely objective nor purely subjective, but effused in lived space involving the body immediately and pre-reflectively (Schmitz 1977; Griffero 2014).

Simmel thus constitutes a central and, in many respects, anticipatory figure for an atmospheric understanding of sociality. His notion of *Stimmung* and his relational conception of *Wechselwirkung* not only anticipate elements of the theory of atmospheres but also pose the problem of mediating between sensory experience and cultural form. For this reason, Simmel will not be treated here as merely another precursor alongside the other classics. Rather, his work provides a particularly developed basis for the argument, which will be taken up again in Section 6 to articulate the relation between imaginative atmospheres and atmospheric imaginary.



3.4. The Founding Fathers' Contribution to Constructing the Concept of Social Atmosphere

The preceding survey has shown that, although the classical sociological tradition lacked an explicit atmospheric lexicon, it contains intuitions and categories that converge on the existence of a diffuse, supra-individual, and corporeally binding affective quality. Taken together, the classics examined here offer distinct but complementary contributions to sociology of atmosphere. Their contributions are best understood not as isolated achievements but as constitutive dimensions of the same object. This genealogical reconstruction, however, risks reducing heterogeneous thinkers to separate components of a synthesis constructed retrospectively. The most serious objection is therefore whether, if every structure, collective representation, ritual, and sensory form can be redescribed as atmosphere, the concept risks explaining everything and therefore nothing: a form of pan-atmospherism devoid of discriminating power. The objection is legitimate. Our response is that atmosphere does not fully replace concepts such as structure, norm, or representation but identifies what they do not fully grasp: not the economic cause of fetishism, but its sensory phenomenology; not the integrative function of ritual, but the affective quality generated within it. Atmosphere is therefore not a universal key to the social but a specific stratum of it; the perceptual-affective dimension that other categories presuppose without thematizing. What classical sociology lacked, and what Schmitzian neophenomenology formulated with particular systematicity, is the ontological clarification of this nucleus: the recognition

that atmospheres are not merely effects of structures or reflections of collective representations but affective realities with a consistency of their own. The proto-atmospheric genealogy is therefore not merely an exercise in conceptual archeology but a recognition of a dispersed conceptual web that can be gathered within a theoretical framework capable of extending its analytical scope. Contemporary sociology, to which we now turn, carries this task forward.

4. From Contemporary Sociology to the Analytical Dimensions of the Concept

Contemporary sociology, from the 1970s onward, does not merely extend the genealogy with additional names; it provides tools for grounding the analytical dimensions through which the concept of atmosphere can be defined. Three authors suffice for the purpose. Goffman's analysis of the interaction order and frame breaks (Goffman 1959; 1974) establishes atmosphere as an observable situational phenomenon with thresholds, indicators, and points of crisis. The "definition of the situation" is not simply a cognitive frame that individuals deliberately apply to experience but a pre-reflective orientation toward a situational quality already at work before the participants begin to manage it. The concept of *keying*, developed in *Frame Analysis* (1974), describes how the tonality of a situation can be radically transformed—for example, when a quarrel becomes a game or a liturgy degenerates into parody. Certain actions alter the overall affective quality of an event even before its propositional content is fully defined. Goffmanian situations are therefore not merely containers within which action unfolds but atmospheric events: configurations of corporeal co-presence, reciprocal attention, and affective involvement that generate a specific tonality as an emergent effect not deliberately produced by any single participant. Collins, with his theory of *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Collins 2004), as anticipated in the discussion of Durkheim, describes the spontaneous generation of emotional energy through co-presence, shared focus, and rhythmic synchronization—the emergent pole of atmospheric production. The Collinsian concept of *emotional entrainment* describes how bodies synchronize their rhythms during interaction, producing a shared affective tonality that participants experience as arising from the situation rather than from themselves. In Schmitzian terms, Collins describes the generation of collective atmospheres through corporeal synchronization: the mechanism through which effervescence, in the Durkheimian sense, produces a collective affective reality with its own coercive power. Hochschild, through her analysis of emotional labor (Hochschild 1983), describes the opposite pole: the intentional production and institutional regulation of feeling. Spontaneous genesis and deliberate fabrication are not two distinct phenomena but two opposite ends of a single axis. In *The Managed Heart* (1983), Hochschild shows that the emotional tonality of commercial service interactions (the cordiality of the flight attendant or the pressure of debt collection) is not simply a spontaneous expression of individual feeling but a managed performance governed by organizational "feeling



rules" that determine which affective quality should be produced and maintained. The flight attendant does not merely display cordiality: she produces an atmosphere of safety, care, and pleasantness that the passenger experiences as a quality of the situation rather than as the product of labor. Hochschild's analysis thus identifies a crucial dimension of a sociological theory of atmospheres: they may emerge spontaneously from interaction but can be deliberately designed, managed, and commercialized as components of the service experience.

Other contributions can be situated along this trajectory: Bourdieu's *habitus* as the corporeal sedimentation of long-duration structural conditions, Maffesoli's neo-tribalism, Latour's attention to nonhuman actants within the affective web of situations, Sloterdijk's spherological ontology, and, in the Anglo-American tradition, the affective turn's focus on the prepersonal transmission of affect (Brennan 2004; Anderson 2009). Each adds a specification concerning the scale or materiality of the phenomenon without altering its overall configuration. From these contributions, three analytical dimensions emerge, along which we will define social atmosphere in the following section. The first is *intentionality*, ranging from spontaneous genesis (Collins) to deliberate fabrication (Hochschild). The second is *spatiotemporal scale*, ranging from the ephemeral interactional event (Goffman) to long-duration configurations sedimented by structures (Bourdieu and, earlier, Marx and Tocqueville). The third is *mode of reproduction*: the way an atmosphere either dissipates with the occasion or stabilizes by anchoring itself to material and symbolic devices. These are not types of atmosphere but axes of variation that every atmosphere combines; the definition developed below rests on this three-dimensional space framework.



5. Toward a Sociological Definition of the Social Atmosphere

Understanding the morphology of a social atmosphere (how it is born, thickens, propagates, and dissolves) is perhaps the most original contribution a sociological theory can make to the study of atmospheres, which has remained largely within philosophy and aesthetics. From a sociological perspective, an atmosphere has a history: it is not a stable datum but a dynamic process that passes through identifiable phases: genesis, condensation, transmission, and dissolution.

The *genesis* of an atmosphere occurs through what Collins would call the conditions of a successful interaction ritual: corporeal co-presence, shared attentional focus, common feeling, and rhythmic synchronization of bodies (Collins 2004). Not every instance of co-presence generates an atmosphere of equal intensity. Certain thresholds, critical densities, and combinations of situational elements, once reached, trigger a shared affective quality that exceeds each participant. The Durkheimian lesson remains fundamental: atmospheres are paradigmatically produced in the assembly, through the reciprocal involvement of bodies in a shared space. The ritual assembly, however, is only a limiting case; atmospheres also emerge in ordinary and routine situations whenever corporeal co-



presence reaches sufficient attunement. The *condensation* of an atmosphere occurs through what Schmitz calls anchoring (*Verankerung*): diffuse affective quality progressively thickens around elements of the situation that become poles of radiation (Schmitz 2014; Griffero 2014). The totem in a ceremony, the flag in a demonstration, and the stage in a concert are poles of atmospheric condensation (situational elements that concentrate, reflect, and amplify collective affective force). This anchoring mechanism gives atmospheres a degree of stability and reproducibility: the atmosphere of a ceremony does not begin anew at each celebration but can be reactivated through the repetition of situational elements that have previously functioned as poles of condensation.

The *transmission* of an atmosphere occurs, as Brennan (2004) has shown, through channels that precede symbolic communication: biochemical, postural, rhythmic, and tonal. Bodies in co-presence attune to one another before exchanging words or intentional signals. This corporeal transmission allows an atmosphere to propagate within a situation and beyond its original boundaries: an affective quality generated in an assembly can "contaminate" those who were not present through the bodies of participants who carry the affective trace of the experience. Here, Bateson's notion of an ecology of mind becomes productive: the "pattern that connects" is a principle of organization that traverses living systems beyond individual boundaries. It provides a formal structure for understanding how atmospheres propagate from one body to another and from one situation to another (Bateson 1979).

The *dissolution* of an atmosphere does not take a single form. The most conspicuous is rupture: what Goffman would call a frame break, in which an element shatters the shared focus and interrupts bodily attunement, as in embarrassment, scandal, or a gaffe that reveals, in the crisis, the structure of the violated field (Goffman 1974). Yet atmospheres do not always fade abruptly. Some attenuate through the exhaustion of attention or corporeal density, like a party that gradually frays; others transform into a different tonality, as emotion gives way to weariness or euphoria to disenchantment; others are replaced when a new focus imposes itself and establishes another atmosphere. Rupture, attenuation, transformation, and replacement are therefore distinct modes of dissolution, with different temporalities and indicators. Theory must discriminate among them, rather than reduce dissolution to the suggestive but partial image of abrupt interruption.

We take up the three analytical dimensions grounded in Section 4 here to show their heuristic yield, recognizing that the same atmosphere can combine them simultaneously. The first is *intentionality*: an atmosphere may emerge spontaneously from interaction, without anyone having designed it Durkheimian effervescence, Collinsian emotional energy, or result from deliberate situational engineering through architecture, lighting, music, or interaction protocols designed to produce a particular effect (Böhme 2017; Pine & Gilmore 1999), extending to the emotional labor through which a service worker uses voice and body to fabricate an atmosphere that is not his or her own but that of the organization (Hochschild 1983). The second is *spatiotemporal scale*, ranging from the ephemeral atmosphere of an encounter to long-duration atmospheres sedimented in economic and spatial

structures, such as alienation, habitus, and mild despotism. The third is *mode of reproduction*: some atmospheres exhaust themselves in the event, whereas others stabilize because they are anchored to material and symbolic devices that regenerate them. These dimensions, however, are intertwined. A designed atmosphere (the playlist and lighting of a shop, for example) may produce emergent effects not anticipated by the designer while simultaneously being conditioned by a broader structure, such as the economy of consumption, that no individual decorator controls. To distinguish "emergent," "designed," and "structural" atmospheres as separate genres would therefore mistake axes of a single analytical space for distinct species.

Finally, social atmosphere is distinguished from contiguous concepts. It does not coincide with the *collective emotional climate* as conceptualized in social psychology: emotional climate refers to the distribution or prevalence of individual emotional states within a population, whereas atmosphere is an emergent affective quality generated through the interaction between participants and their environment. It therefore cannot be reduced to the sum of individual emotions. Nor does it coincide with Durkheimian *effervescence*, which refers specifically to the affective quality generated in ritual assemblies at moments of exceptional interactional density. Atmosphere is more pervasive, characterizing everyday and routine situations as well—the atmosphere of an office on a Monday morning no less than of a religious ceremony. Finally, it does not coincide with individual or collective *mood* (*Stimmung* in the narrower sense): mood is a background affective orientation that a subject may carry from one situation to another, whereas atmosphere is situationally anchored. A subject may enter a situation in a gloomy mood and find himself swept up in an atmosphere of lightness; the two dimensions intersect but remain analytically distinct.

Social atmosphere can therefore be summarized as follows: a situational and supra-individual affective reality, endowed with a spatiality of its own, generated through co-presence (corporeal in the paradigmatic case, but also mediated, distributed, or asynchronous) in relation to an environment; anchored to concrete situational elements and their poles of radiation; elaborated and transmitted through the imaginary; and capable of orienting action and perception before conscious deliberation. It is the category that a sociology of atmospheres places at the center of its agenda: not a metaphorical or purely descriptive notion, but an analytical instrument for illuminating a dimension of the social that categories of structure, norm, and rational action leave in shadow; the affective quality of the relational and environmental field in which human beings live, act, and recognize one another before they can name it.

6. Imaginative Atmospheres and Atmospheric Imaginary

The preceding survey has shown how sociological discourse, despite its long lack of an explicit lexicon for thematizing atmosphere, contains intuitions, descriptions,



and analytical categories that converge from different angles on the same conceptual nucleus. The question at the heart of this article nevertheless remains: What relation exists between atmosphere and the imaginary?

This theoretical-analytical juncture has not been fully developed even within German neophenomenology, which has focused predominantly on the perceptual, corporeal, and emotional dimensions of atmospheres and paid less attention to how they are configured through collective thought, myths, narratives, images, aesthetic products, memories, and shared practices. The question, then, is how atmospheric feeling is imaginatively elaborated and, conversely, how the imaginary, emerging from representation, acquires sensible presence and orients the affective quality of social environments.

To distinguish these two directions analytically, we call imaginative atmospheres the situated configurations in which feeling and imagining are attuned through reciprocal action in the here and now of experience; atmospheric imaginary, by contrast, refers to the capacity of symbolic and cultural forms to exceed their objectual delimitation, radiate sensibly into environments, and predispose social experiences. Imaginative atmospheres thus belong to the *instituting* dimension of associated life, whereas atmospheric imaginary belongs to the relatively *instituted* dimension of the forms through which associated life objectifies itself. The relation between these poles is circular rather than linear: there is no before and after. When individuals meet, they generate a determinate symbolic-perceptual sphere in relation to an environment that is not merely natural but socially constituted by representations, objects and technologies, architectures and urban structures, and other atmospheric manifestations of the imaginary within a given geocultural context. The distinction is therefore analytical and ideal-typical rather than an ontological dichotomy: the two poles are abstractions of the same process and, in reality, are always co-present and reciprocally transform one another.

6.1 From Instituting Imaginary to Sensible Forms

This polarity between the instituting and the instituted has a theoretical precedent: it's about one of the major pairs of twentieth-century social thought, Cornelius Castoriadis's distinction between the instituting and instituted imaginary (Castoriadis 1975). For Castoriadis, every society institutes itself by creating a magma of imaginary significations (the figures, myths, and ideas through which a historical world gives itself meaning). This creative power, the instituting imaginary, becomes deposited and rigidified in institutions and consolidated significations, the instituted imaginary, which in turn tend to conceal their origins and present themselves as a natural order. The correspondence with our pair is clear: the atmospheric imaginary, in its crystallized and relatively durable forms, stands on the instituted side, while imaginative atmospheres, capable of becoming "incubators of new images" that challenge the given order, contain something of the instituting moment. The circularity between life and form thus finds in Castoriadis an ontological grounding: forms draw on what institutes them and can always be instituted otherwise.





The correspondence, however, is not identity, and signaling this gap is essential to avoid presenting a derivation as something it is not. Castoriadis conceives the imaginary as signification, not sensation: his account concerns the institution of meaning at the level of society as a whole and its self-representation, while remaining programmatically distant from the perceptual and corporeal sphere, even polemicizing against approaches that reduce the imaginary to the mere production of images. Our pair performs the inverse movement. What interests Castoriadis less (the way a signification becomes the air one breathes, a tonality that envelops a body, or a feeling shared in a situation) is precisely our object. We reintroduce the sensible and *leiblich* dimension that the Castoriadian ontology subordinates to signification. Whereas Castoriadis privileges creation and rupture (the irruption of the new that refounds a world) we emphasize the continuous, everyday, and microscopic circulation between feeling and imagining, which requires no such refoundation to operate. In brief, we take from Castoriadis the instituting/instituted polarity and bring it from the realm of significations to the flesh of situations.

If Castoriadis provides the dynamic (the relation between what institutes and what is instituted) we must still account for the quality of the imaginary: an imaginative atmosphere is never generic but has a color, a style, a determinate symbolic timbre. Here the anthropology of the imaginary of Gilbert Durand (1960) becomes useful. Durand organizes images into symbolic regimes: a diurnal regime, governed by antithesis, separation, and heroic ascent, and a nocturnal regime, characterized by the mystical inversion of fusion and the dramatic synthesis of the cycle. These are connected by the *trajet anthropologique*, the continuous exchange between the subject's drives and the solicitations of the environment. Transposed to our terrain, Durand's regimes function as a grammar of tonalities: they provide the qualitative repertoire through which an atmospheric imaginary gives a situation its particular style. Atmospheres of order, boundaries, and heroic mobilization (the parade, tribunal, or rally) evoke a diurnal regime; those of intimacy, warmth, and fusion (the vigil, feast, or recollection) evoke a nocturnal one. Durand thus offers what Castoriadis lacks: a typology of imaginative qualities and, with it, a means of specifying not only that an atmosphere is imaginatively configured but how.

Durand's universalist tendency must likewise be kept at a distance: his regimes risk becoming rigid, ahistorical archetypes or anthropological invariants removed from social change. We therefore treat them as a heuristic of qualities, not a taxonomy of human constants; as historically filled repertoires rather than eternal molds. What neither Castoriadis nor Durand provides is precisely what constitutes Simmel's contribution. Castoriadis theorizes the institution of meaning but pays less attention to the sensible; Durand classifies styles of the imaginary but detaches them from situated social interaction. Neither fully theorizes the mediation between the two: how, in the here and now of associated life, a signification becomes perceptible and a feeling takes form.

6.2 *Stimmung and Imaginative Atmospheres*



This is precisely Simmel's territory. His sociological aesthetics, concept of *Stimmung*, sociology of the senses, and concept of sociation show how the imaginary becomes atmosphere through the microscopic interactions among bodies and how atmosphere becomes sedimented in durable forms through sociation. In this way, Simmel restores the sensible circulation of the instituting/instituted pair and the historical genesis of symbolic regimes. He is therefore not a third name alongside the two but the juncture that allows them to be held together without either disembodiment meaning or reifying forms. On this basis, we can turn to Simmel's sociological aesthetics. Although he develops neither the concept of atmosphere nor that of the imaginary systematically, his impressionistic analyses of modernity provide a framework for thinking about the social relation between them beyond the description of affective environments, urban emotional tonalities, sensory encounters, and the orienting force of spaces and rhythms of collective life (Wolff 1950; Frisby 1992). Because this framework also encompasses the imaginary, Simmel must be distinguished from the other theorists of atmospheres. In an atmospheric rereading, he allows us to understand atmospheres as conformations in which the spiritual meanings of associated life become sensible.

The Simmelian conception of spirit has no religious, metaphysical, or unconscious connotation. It indicates the human capacity to transcend the immediacy of life (*Leben*) at the level of representation, where biological and social facts acquire sense and meaning through what he calls an "intangible intersubjective substance" that could be designated as the "collective psyche" (Simmel 1890: 22–23).

The collective psyche, like the individual psyche, activates an ambivalent dynamic: it synthesizes reality while simultaneously expanding it. These are the two aspects of representation or, in Simmelian terms, of the process of spiritualization through which life becomes something more than life (*Mehr-Leben*). On the one hand, representation brings "the mere contiguity of things in time and space back to the synthetic unity of an image, a concept, a proposition" (Simmel 1897: 131). By giving sensory stimuli form within an intelligible image, it necessarily captures less than the inexhaustible multiplicity of reality. On the other hand, representation expands reality by enriching it with extrasensory contents: states of mind, memories, meanings, expectations, and narratives.

The image can therefore be defined, consistently with Simmel's perspective, as a spiritualized perceptual conformation capable of influencing and, in some cases, orienting human behavior. Simmel is explicit: "images, however negatively characterized, are always the presupposition, the material and the guide of our practical action insofar as through it we put ourselves in contact with the world" (Simmel 1900: 161–162). Within his epistemological framework, reality is a spiritualized vision of the world produced "by that mode of imagining that must lie at the base so that we can act usefully" (Simmel 1912: 59). This mode of imagining is not, however, disembodied: it arises from a body situated within a sensible and affectively connoted environment.

The consequence of this framing is significant: Simmel makes it possible to conceptualize the imaginative atmosphere. The human being, he suggests, does not

simply perceive the world but simultaneously imagines it. Existence unfolds within an environmental field in which perception and imaginative elaboration interact, sometimes reinforcing and sometimes disrupting one another, thereby predisposing the field of experience.

Simmel captures this dynamic through the concept of *Stimmung*. Derived from *Stimme* ("voice") and *stimmen* ("to tune"), the term denotes the affective unity through which a sensory multiplicity is experienced as an overall configuration. It is neither a purely subjective nor an objective property of things, but a sphere of resonance in which sensory perception and imaginative elaboration acquire a common tonality. His *Philosophy of Landscape* (Simmel 1913) is exemplary in this regard. When we encounter trees, valleys, mountains, lakes, rivers, coasts, and gulfs as a sensory continuum, we do not yet have a landscape. Landscape emerges when imagination selects these elements from the continuity of nature and forms them into a unitary configuration with a determinate *Stimmung*. Representation thus breaks the natural continuity of things and recomposes them as a unified vision; hence, "where we actually see a landscape and no longer a sum of individual natural objects, we have a work of art in its nascent state" (Simmel 1913: 77). Landscape is therefore neither reducible to its natural elements nor an arbitrary mental creation: it is an imaginative conformation of nature whose formal unity is experienced simultaneously as an affective tonality.

A similar dynamic operates in Simmel's sociology of interaction. Rather than reducing society to an economic structure, collective consciousness, or a unified system of values, Simmel focuses on the elementary processes of association through which individuals look at one another with jealousy, dine together, appear likable or unlikable, dress for one another, form amorous or instrumental relations, or simply ask one another for directions (Simmel 1908a: 78). These apparently ordinary interactions constitute the molecular processes through which social bonds are formed, sustained, transformed, and dissolved. Society is thus woven through the dense web of reciprocal action that sustains "all the variety and unity of this life of society, so clear and so enigmatic" (ibidem: 79). Reworking *Stimmung* in this sociological direction, social *Stimmung* can be understood as the tonality of collective experience produced when individuals, through interaction, attune feeling and imagining within a shared configuration. A feast, ceremony, political demonstration, or metropolitan street activates not only immediate sensation but also images of community, authority, danger, belonging, estrangement, equality, or transgression. Social atmospheres can therefore be understood as affective tonalities imaginatively configured through reciprocal action.

This is particularly evident in Simmel's analysis of sociability (Simmel 1910). Here, individuals associate as if temporarily equal, suspending the asymmetries of the broader social order. Sociability produces a resonance grounded in the pleasure of co-presence and gives sensible form to an image of harmonious community. The imaginary, therefore, need not derive from an already constituted myth or symbolic system; it can emerge atmospherically from reciprocal interaction itself.



Simmel's attention to the material details of everyday life further illuminates the nexus between feeling and imagining. In his discussion of adornment, for example, the brooch simultaneously expresses the wearer's personality and amplifies its presence within interaction, transforming the self into a public image (Simmel 1908b). Perfume similarly transforms bodily odor into an artificial olfactory atmosphere oriented toward producing a particular impression on others (ibidem: 558–559). Through ornaments, clothing, and scent, subjective qualities become sensible and socially consequential.

This leads to Simmel's *Sociology of the Senses* (1907), in which sight, hearing, smell, and touch are analyzed as distinct modalities through which social relations are constituted. Each sense establishes particular regimes of proximity and distance, involvement and separation, reciprocity and asymmetry (Howes 2003; Vannini, Waskul & Gottschalk 2012). From the perspective of the imaginary, these sensory regimes are also socially ordered by symbolic distinctions that shape what is experienced as pleasant or unpleasant, pure or contaminated, familiar or foreign, refined or vulgar odor. Sensory experience is therefore never socially neutral: it participates in the imaginative ordering of bodies, spaces, and relations.

6.3. Sociation and the Atmospheric Imaginary

Simmel's sociology of senses makes it possible to understand the imaginative atmospheres as affectively qualified relational fields in which individuals resonate as parts of an overall configuration. His analysis of the material forms of associated life (objects, works of art, architecture, cities, ornaments, and clothing) provides a complementary route for understanding the atmospheric imaginary: the capacity of representations and cultural forms to extend beyond the sphere of collective meaning and become sensibly present in bodies, objects, spaces, rhythms, and relations, thereby giving them a common style.

The church, to return to the earlier example, illustrates this process. Through its architecture, materials, furnishings, iconography, and ritual objects, it renders the religious imaginary sensibly present and objectifies it in a form capable of predisposing an atmospheric field. Within this field, reciprocal interaction may attune itself to tonalities of recollection, solemnity, and elevation. Yet the architectural configuration does not determine the experience mechanically: the same space may evoke disquiet, estrangement, aesthetic curiosity, or indifference. The atmospheric imaginary therefore predisposes and orients without fully determining the imaginative atmosphere as it is concretely lived.

Stated in general terms, if the imaginative atmospheres of the social attune feeling and imagining in reciprocal action here and now, the atmospheric imaginary designates the process through which this attunement is objectified, through sociation, in relatively durable cultural forms. The term sociation translates *Vergesellschaftung*, which Simmel uses to indicate the concatenation of reciprocal actions within an already culturalized world composed of relational, institutional, expressive, material and religious forms (Simmel 1984: 630–631). Once objectified,

however, these forms acquire an autonomous existence (*Mehr-als-Leben*) that can conflict with the vitality of reciprocal action. They are therefore destined to dissolve and make way for new forms. Reciprocal action is an incessantly creative and destructive process in which nothing remains fixed, since all historical-social formations undergo continuous change (Simmel 1918: 13). In each epoch, the forms produced through sociation tend to crystallize into a specific imaginative configuration, a symbolic matrix capable of conferring a common style on the social construction of reality. This is what Simmel makes explicit in *The Conflict of Modern Culture* (1918):

In every great epoch of civilization endowed with sharply carved characters, one can perceive a central concept from which the spiritual movements spring and into which, together, they seem to flow; and this, whether the epoch itself possesses an abstract consciousness of that concept, or whether the concept forms only the ideal point of irradiation of those movements, whose nature and meaning for the epoch only one who observes later manages to know. Each of these central concepts naturally meets with deviations, distortions, and oppositions, but with all this remains the hidden king of that era of spirit (Simmel 1918: 18).



The “central concept” of an epoch can be reread as its dominant imaginative nucleus: not an isolated representation but a center of convergence and irradiation capable of conferring a common style on the spiritual movements and cultural objectifications of associated life. As Simmel specifies with reference to Western civilization, this center changes over time: in Greek classicism, it was the idea of being; in the Middle Ages, the concept of God; in the Renaissance, the idea of nature; and in the eighteenth century, the ego (ibidem: 19). These historically determined symbolic matrices operate as centers of convergence and irradiation for the collective meanings that give form to the social reality of an epoch. The morphological order of culture thus gives consistency to the imaginary, transforming it into a visible, tangible, and analyzable atmospheric environment.

If society is a work of art, created through sociation according to a determinate imaginative style, Simmel takes the methodological path of sociological aesthetics to observe, in every segment of reality and in the exterior and transient aspects of things, the spiritual character of associated life (Davis 1973). Through this lens, the pyramid can be understood as an atmospheric architecture in which the theocratic imaginary becomes sensible through the progressive symmetrical reduction of its volumes toward the apex, culminating in the sacred figure of the pharaoh. The practical ends of this despotic and superhuman power become embodied in the pyramid: without this material form, the theocratic imaginary could neither acquire the same sensible presence nor radiate with comparable force into collective life.

Simmelian aesthetics is therefore not reducible to a sociology of art understood as a specialist field concerned with collective phenomena (Vozza 2002: 55; Mele 2006: 11–12). Rather, it is a method through which Simmel enters into resonance with the

forms produced by sociation and grasps their spiritual order through their sensible manifestations.

Sociological aesthetics is thus simultaneously a phenomenology and a physiognomics of historical-social forms (Gurisatti 2006: 395–401). This approach becomes particularly significant in Simmel's analysis of modern life, an epoch characterized by the absence of a single central concept and by the permanent conflict among heterogeneous conceptions of the world. In this context, money assumes the role of dominant symbolic form of the modern cosmos, capable of neutralizing qualitative differences by translating them into quantitative equivalences.

Going beyond the narrow ambit of economic science and without reducing money to material relations alone, Simmelian aesthetics grasps it as a spiritual form in which "deeper currents whose presuppositions are psychological and, indeed, metaphysical" converge (Simmel 1900: 86–88). Like an abstract god, money transforms the qualities of things, persons, social bonds, and conceptions of life into quantities, patrimonial value, and units calculable in view of future gain.

The metropolis is the artificial environment in which the objective spirit of monetary modernity assumes an atmospheric character, extending into everyday life and penetrating the psyche of individuals. Unlike the slower rhythms of provincial and rural life, the metropolis is a frenetic and shocking atmospheric space produced by the rapid succession of contrasting stimuli, the turnover of fashions and lifestyles, and the acceleration of time, which intensifies the nervous life of its inhabitants.

To shield himself from these shocks, the metropolitan individual reacts principally with the intellect and assumes the ideal-typical figure of the *blasé*, for whom everything appears on a greyscale, within an indistinct affective tonality in which the qualitative and sentimental nuances of social relations are lost. This adaptation, however, also leads him to incorporate the philosophy of money: the cynical attitude toward the qualities of things and persons, the individualistic conception of freedom, the calculation of social bonds in utilitarian terms, the rationalization of action in pursuit of gain, and the orientation of desire toward external goods. The metropolis is therefore more than a large city: it is the atmospheric space in which the spirit of money and the subjective spirit attune themselves with particular intensity.

In summary, Simmel's approach allows us to identify the bond between atmosphere and imaginary along two complementary directions: life and form. On the side of life, this bond appears in the imaginative configurations of reciprocal action, in which individuals perceive and imagine themselves within a common feeling experienced in the here and now. However evanescent, the imaginative atmosphere constitutes the affective tonality of being together in a determinate space and time. On the side of form, the bond between the atmosphere and imaginary is exteriorized through sociation in relatively durable configurations, shaped by culturally defined spiritual principles. The atmospheric imaginary is, in this sense, the sensible and radiating dimension assumed by symbolic nuclei when they become objectified in institutions, architectures, artefacts, forms of knowledge, norms, and expressive languages. Such forms do not determine experience



univocally but orient reciprocal action and predispose certain imaginative atmospheres rather than others.

The two dimensions are not separate. Forms of the atmospheric imaginary predispose certain imaginative atmospheres; the latter, however, can become incubators of new images, meanings, and conceptions of the world that enter into conflict with the instituted reality and, in determinate historical circumstances, transform it. This occurred, for example, in the salon atmospheres of the eighteenth-century Parisian intellectual élites, in which Enlightenment ideas thickened and took form.

There is, then, a relational and recursive dynamic between imaginative atmospheres and atmospheric imaginary, analogous to that between life and form, through which the process of sociation is continually reproduced and transformed. Simmel constitutes the central theoretical and methodological reference for this proposal. His sociological aesthetics is an analytical vision of social surfaces inspired by Goethe's maxim that "let us seek nothing behind the phenomena: they themselves are the theory" (Goethe 1833, 1983). Profoundly influenced by Goethean morphology (Marzo 2007), Simmel does not seek behind associative phenomena an unconscious or economic structure that would exhaust their meaning, but observes what the phenomena themselves disclose. By valorizing the sensible sphere and rehabilitating it as an instrument of knowledge, the aesthetic approach enables the sociologist to capture and understand the atmospheres of the social imaginary.

The scheme should be read as a heuristic rather than an ontological division. The distinction between imaginative atmosphere and atmospheric imaginary is analytical and ideal-typical: in associated life, the two poles are co-present and continually pass into one another. The scheme separates them for the purpose of observation and comparison, not because they exist independently.



Dimension	Imaginative atmosphere	Atmospheric imaginary
Definition	Situated affective configuration in which, in the here and now of interaction, feeling and imagining are attuned among co-present bodies.	Capacity of symbolic and cultural forms (architectures, objects, rites, styles, and narratives) to exceed their object, radiate sensibly, and predispose atmospheres.
Mechanism	Focusing attention, rhythmic synchronization, pre-symbolic affective contagion (Collins 2004; Brennan 2004), and anchoring to situational poles.	Sedimentation and objectification of feeling through sociation; codification within a symbolic regime that imprints a style.
Temporality	Ephemeral and situated: born, intensifies, transforms, or breaks with the situation.	Relatively durable: persists beyond individual situations and predisposes them; changes through historical shifts,



Dimension	Imaginative atmosphere	Atmospheric imaginary
		but may also undergo rapid ruptures and recompositions.
Observable indicators	Bodily and rhythmic synchronies, prosody and posture, density and direction of attention, markers of rupture (embarrassment, silences), and thresholds of entry and exit.	Recurring iconographic and narrative motifs, material anchoring devices (architectures, interfaces, ritual objects), shared styles, and the “central concept” of an epoch or an environment.

TAB. 1 - *Synoptic scheme of the imaginative atmosphere and atmospheric imaginary*



7. Conclusions

The path traveled has intended to show that atmospheres are not an impalpable residue to be left to aesthetics or psychology, but a social reality in their own right: situated and supra-individual affective configurations, endowed with a spatiality of their own, produced through the co-presence of bodies in relation to the environment and anchored to concrete elements of the situation. Bringing them within the framework of the historical-social imaginary has allowed us to withdraw them both from structural determinism and from pure phenomenology, restoring to them a genesis, a history, and a direction. The pair *imaginative atmospheres/atmospheric imaginary* does not merely classify phenomena: it names the living circularity between feeling attuned in reciprocal action and the cultural forms that objectify and transmit it. It is in this circularity, rather than at either of its extremes, that the dark matter of social facts becomes observable.

The testing ground of the proposal will necessarily be empirical: the task of the present contribution is to prepare its lexicon, distinctions, and indicators. Several paths follow from this framework. In urban settings, *ambiances* (Thibaud, 2015) and the phenomenology of the city (Hasse 2008) show how squares and transit spaces produce tonalities that orient behavior and belonging. In organizations, the emotional tonality of workplaces, from Hochschild's emotional labor to Julmi's (2017) atmospheres of enterprise, can be observed as a device of production rather than simply as a psychological climate. Politically, collective atmospheres allow us to reread the effervescence of movements, the fabrication of populist states of mind, and resentment as affective matter that thickens and propagates before becoming discourse. The digital sphere presents a further challenge: platforms and algorithmic environments generate tonalities such as the restlessness of infinite scrolling, viral euphoria and indignation, and the connected solitude of the "swarm" (Han 2013), often in the absence of full corporeal co-presence. Closely related is the experience

economy, in which the aestheticization of commercial spaces (Böhme 1995; Biehl-Missal & Saren 2012) reveals deliberately engineered atmospheres. These fields converge on a methodological question: how does one observe a *quasi-thing*? The answer calls for sensible methods, including multisensory ethnography, walk-alongs, thick description, and analysis of the material and symbolic devices that function as poles of radiation.

The framework also has applied implications. Architectural and urban design can treat the care of atmospheres as part of its mandate, particularly in spaces of care, hospitals, residential facilities, and therapeutic environments, where atmospheric quality may bear on well-being. In organizations, it permits intervention not through motivational rhetoric alone but through the material, rhythmic, and symbolic anchorings that produce organizational climates. In marketing and communication, by contrast, it raises an ethical question: distinguishing arrangements that welcome from forms of manipulation that capture becomes a deontological problem, particularly in political communication, where the instrumental production of fear, indignation, and belonging is a significant concern for democratic life.

It is here that the sociology of atmospheres reveals its constitutive ambivalence and, with it, its task. Atmospheres can be fabricated, sold, and manipulated, but they also enable collectivities to experience cohesion, imagine alternatives, and contest the existing order. The same dark matter that feeds the conformism of consumption can become an incubator of emancipatory imaginaries. Rendering this matter visible—showing how atmospheres of the imaginary orient associated life without ever appearing fully in light—is therefore not merely a descriptive refinement but a critical gesture: a precondition for social actors to recognize, rather than merely undergo, the air they breathe. The *imago* from which we set out is not an evanescent shadow but the sensible form in which a society breathes itself; learning to read it remains, for sociology, a task barely begun.



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