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Affect Theory and History of Emotions

by Ute Frevert

Introduction

Since the 1990s, affects and emotions have become major issues both in public debate and scientific research. Many disciplines partook in this surge of attention and interest, social sciences and humanities just as much as psychology and neuroscience. Some scholars have even gone so far as to proclaim that an emotional or affective “turn” has taken place, while others consider the contemporary period an age of “affectivism.” Historians, too, have engaged with emotions in historiography. While literary criticism and media studies have widely embraced affect theory, the great majority of historians have taken their distance for reasons that will be outlined in this article. It will introduce readers to historical definitions of and methodological approaches to emotions, to relevant sources and how to analyze them, as well as to broader assumptions and hypotheses about historicizing emotions and what they do in and to human history.

Context

Emotions—or rather affects, passions, feelings, and sentiments as they were called up until the twentieth century—have long captured the attention of writers and readers. From early antiquity to late modernity, they have been observed, described, and analyzed in multiple types of texts. The oldest work of Western literature, Homer’s epic poem the *Iliad*, started with the rage of the Greek hero Achilles and the actions it led to. Ancient philosophers took a more systematic approach and underscored the phenomenology and communicative function of emotions. Medical doctors tried to assess their effect on people’s well-being and health; moreover, they sought to explain the physiological processes that gave rise to or dampened emotions. Legal theory and practice made assumptions about how emotions affected people’s behavior and prompted them to commit crimes and misdemeanors, and they reflected on whether emotions counted as mitigating factors that justified milder sentences. Church officials, theologians, and pious people actively defined a set of emotions and emotional practices that they believed needed to be felt, experienced, and demonstrated before, during, and after religious service or in reverence to religious paintings, texts, and spaces.

Over the centuries, societies thus accumulated knowledge in written and oral texts, material goods, and architecture about what emotions do and how they do it. They also tried to distinguish positive from negative affect and strained themselves to arrive at sound judgments about what kind of emotions were healthy and desirable and which were detrimental to a person or group. Although some of this knowledge might have been lost, historians have been able to uncover a wealth of information about how past societies handled emotions.

An issue of continuous debate and controversy has been the intensity and amount of emotional fervor that societies or social groups found acceptable or necessary. During the modern period, that controversy engaged wider parts of the population and numerous societal institutions. In the last decades of the eighteenth century, middle-class men and women set themselves apart from the nobility by emphasizing their own sense of compassion and empathy, which they found lacking in cold-hearted aristocrats. For Romantic authors, however, middle-class life was far too disciplined and seemed to leave little room for individual creativity and passionate feelings. Thomas Carlyle, in 1829, called his times “the Mechanical Age” or the “Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word,” lamenting that “men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand,” governed “by rule and calculated contrivance” (Carlyle 1923: 226, 228).

Less than a century later, the term “rationalization” started to make discursive waves. Among its major and most influential proponents was the sociologist Max Weber, who thought it the defining feature of modern societies. As members of market classes, he elucidated, people became accustomed to acting instrumentally, carefully calculating means and ends. Instead of following culturally defined habits and moral duties, they tailored their behavior to further their own economic, political, or social interests. To achieve those goals, they learned to control their passions, restrain their impulses, and channel their energy into promising fields of action. Rationalization thus was accompanied by a growing level of self-reflection and self-evaluation that, at the same time, included awareness of other people’s interests, strategies, and conduct. It was pushed forward by the institutionalization of rules and norms that rendered individual behavior uniform, regular, continuous, and thus transparent and predictable to others. According to Weber, a major force of rationalization was capitalism, aided by bureaucratic state administration (Weber 1946: 331–43).

Reading Weber, the question immediately arose: what about the other side? What was lost, overcome, suspended by the process of the world becoming a more “rational,” “intellectual”—and less “emotional” or “irrational”—place? What was rationalization good and, possibly, bad for? Weber conceived of rationalization in a non-normative way. He did not judge the movement away from custom, tradition, and “affective behavior” and toward purposefully planned and shrewdly calculated action. But he did think, somewhat mournfully, there were only a few spheres such as art, love, and religion that escaped the “iron cage” of instrumental rationality and allowed for affective motives and experiences.

The alleged triumph of rationalization and intellectualization in a “disenchanted world” was intensely commented on at the beginning of the twentieth century. According to its digital archive, while the London *Times* mentioned rationalization twice throughout the whole nineteenth century, that number jumped to 1,200 references during the 1920s. In 1936, the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga crowned “mechanization and organization” the two mighty “gods of our time” (the German translation used “rationalization” rather than mechanization). These gods had generated global networks of cooperation and communication, technical precision, and cool reckoning. But, somewhat paradoxically, they had also produced a new type of human being: less controlled and “more puerile, more susceptible to reactions of feeling,” to a degree approximating madness and brutality. The advent of such men and women was heralded and applauded by the new brand of vitalism or philosophy of life that had gained resonance since the early twentieth century. Opposing the reign of positivism and rationality, it praised the immediacy of human experience and the creativity of intuition. As Huizinga saw it, “life-philosophy” let myth and magic dominate *logos*, or, in Weber’s terms, privileged enchantment over disenchantment (Huizinga 2019: 151–2).

Lebensphilosophie was not just a school of thought with a few intellectual, post-Nietzschean followers. It captured a powerful mood within continental European societies that became institutionalized in a great number of reform movements and associations. Most of them were highly critical of contemporary society. Leaving the city and hiking in the countryside, wearing comfortable, sometimes self-made clothes, preparing healthy food, exposing naked skin to the air and sun—all this spoke to a widely felt need to distance oneself from a lifestyle that appeared overly mechanical and bereft of “spirit” and deep feeling. Such movements were to be found on all sides of the political spectrum. On the Left, they were deemed anti-capitalist, and on the Right, they signified a longing for an organic way of life that praised community over individualism. In some extreme right-wing circles, they adopted racist language and practiced violent exclusion.

Huizinga’s French colleague Lucien Febvre commented on this development in the late 1930s. Trying to convince fellow historians to take emotions seriously, he not only cited examples from his own field of expertise, namely, late medieval and early modern history. With urgency, he also referred to contemporary experiences, to “our own history” that was witnessing “perpetual sentimental resurgences and resurrections”:

We have revivals of the cult of blood, red blood, in its most animal primitive aspects and the cult of the basic forces within us which reveals our lassitude, domestic animals that we are, crushed and beaten down by the frenzied noise and energy of the thousands of machines that obsess us. To compensate, we have the revival of a sort of cult of Mother Earth in whose lap it is so pleasant in the evenings to stretch our weary limbs as if we were her child. No less universal is the revival of a sort of cult of the fostering, healing sun—nudism and camping, frantic immersions in the air and water. We know the exaltation of primitive feelings, going together with a rude dislocation of aim and purpose and the exaltation of cruelty at the expense of love, animal behaviour at the expense of culture, but always animal behaviour that is circumscribed and felt to be superior to culture.

(Febvre 1973: 26)

Such feelings and behavior, according to Febvre, “will tomorrow have finally made our universe into a stinking pit of corpses” (Febvre 1973: 26). Although the historian alluded to the universality of such revivals and talked about “we” and “us,” he mostly focused on European fascism. In his view, German National Socialism ushered in a veritable “revolution” of “sensibility and sentimentality,” a huge “social change” of “morally-accepted affective reactions” (Plamper 2015: 42–3).

Interestingly, Febvre interpreted the “revival” of “primitive feelings” as compensation for modern experiences that Weber or Huizinga would have subsumed under the headings of rationalization and organization. In dramatic, even pathetic terms, he imagined humankind being enslaved and dominated by industrial work and machines that imposed their unrelenting noise and rhythm onto the bodies and minds of those whom they had “crushed” and brought under their energetic control. The various “cults” then served as an emotional escape from such control, a cry for freedom and excess, a refuge that promised healing and consolation.

Febvre, like so many of his contemporaries, was torn. On the one hand, he empathized with people’s quest for shelter from modernity’s obsession with uniformity, regularity, discipline, and speed. On the other hand, he detested what he called “primitive” or “animal behaviour.” He saw love superseded by cruelty and hatred, and feared for “culture” and its capacity to pacify human brutality and violence. Such ambivalence prompted him to apply a model of recurrence and resurgence that spoke against unilinear, “progressive” visions of human development and history.

The belief in progress entertained by many historians and sociologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including Weber, was also embraced by Johan Huizinga in his seminal work on the *Waning of the Middle Ages*, which Febvre studied and quoted. Huizinga described the late medieval period as one of exuberance and passionate feelings; “the most naïve joy” had reigned side by side with “pride, anger, and covetousness” (Huizinga 2007: 18). But this extreme emotional culture was increasingly disciplined and tampered down after the Reformation. Huizinga published the book in 1919, right after the First World War, and it became an immediate hit among those interested in cultural history. Just as Max Weber’s work on early capitalism and the religious spirit of Calvinism had done, it narrated European history as the steady forward march of rationalization and organization.

The tale of progress was spun further by sociologist Norbert Elias in his study of the *Civilizing Process*. First published in 1939, Elias’s book deliberately linked sociogenetic and psychogenetic developments. He argued that state-building in early modern Europe went hand in hand with installing stricter norms of self-control. Since the state monopolized physical violence, citizen-subjects could form societies engaging in peaceful competition. Faced with increasing social differentiation and rising levels of interdependence, those societies were keen on coordinating and fine-tuning human behavior. In its wake, people’s affective apparatuses gradually changed so as to incorporate more restrained modes of conduct and interaction. Instead of giving in to spontaneous desires and strong affects, human beings learned to hold back, think twice, and reflect on the consequences of their actions. Elias borrowed from Weber in calling this “rationalization” and attributed its beginnings to the European nobility, whose members transformed themselves from fierce warriors and rude knights into polite and polished courtiers from the sixteenth century onward.

During that transformation, shame thresholds were exponentially raised. Habits such as spitting, defecating, and cursing in public that had been considered normal and acceptable in earlier times were now frowned upon as utterly despicable and shameful. As the fear of losing face, reputation, and honor before one's peers gained in significance, shame became a central regulator of human drives and appetites. It helped people internalize social demands by translating them into individual psychic constraints. At the same time, the early modern period saw the expansion of shame and embarrassment to encompass ever more modes of behavior and ever more social strata.

Writing in the 1930s, Elias's intention was not to cast an overly optimistic light on what he identified as a European process of civilization and rationalization. Although he criticized psychoanalysis for its lack of historical and social understanding, he still borrowed from Freud's language of "drives" and "super-ego." Behind the intensifying sensitivity toward shame, he argued, lied the ubiquity of fear: fear of social degradation, of someone else's superiority, of one's own vulnerability and defenselessness. Those fears were kept in check by the state and its stable monopoly on violence, which allowed for the pacification of social interaction and communication. But, as Elias added, this particular arrangement was open to change, and the hitherto productive tension between fear and shame could be reversed in its wake. Toward the end of his book, he remarked:

At present we are so accustomed to the existence of these more stable monopolies of force and the greater predictability of violence resulting from them, that we scarcely see their importance for the structure of our conduct and our personality. We scarcely realize how quickly what we call our "reason," this relatively farsighted and differentiated steering of our conduct, with its high degree of affect-control, would crumble or collapse if the anxiety-inducing tensions within and around us changed.

(Elias 2000: 441)

Elias was born into a German-Jewish family and left his home country in 1933. He wrote the *Civilizing Process* in British exile and published it in Switzerland in 1939, the year of Germany's attack on Poland that started the Second World War. Bearing this fact in mind, these final sentences still seem to lack political acumen. Although the author had by then witnessed how the state intentionally incited people to lose control of their affects in German politics and society, he could obviously not imagine that "reason" would collapse altogether and give way to an upsurge of anxieties and the breakdown of public decency. The narrative of progressive civilization and rationalization was too powerful and had too much to offer for it to be questioned and challenged. It took Elias another twenty years to acknowledge that civilization could and had indeed collapsed and regressed under the Nazi regime (Elias 1996: 299–402).

As we can see here and in many other cases, "rationalization" was not just an analytical concept. It also served as a cultural and political pacifier. For Febvre, Huizinga, Elias, and Weber, becoming rational meant becoming predictable, controlled, and readable. While they might have deplored some of its shortcomings, they ultimately shared the positive view of rationalization as a civilizing force and process. As much as Weber reveled in art and eroticism as countercurrents to the rational world of bureaucracy and economy, he did not want to see that world succumb to "affective behavior" and passionate excess. In a similar vein, Febvre wished "culture" to be protected from "primitive" cults and was deeply suspicious of "contagious" emotions that swept through and undermined responsible politics. Writing both as professional sociologists/historians and as citizens committed to liberal democracy, their aim was to restrict emotions to the private sphere of family and friendship, arts, and sports while walling political deliberation and decision-making off from them.

This seemed even more important in the age of mass politics that accompanied mass mobilization and participation. During the nineteenth century, many European countries had installed parliamentary or semi-parliamentary systems of political representation. Citizens—all male in those days—cast their votes in general elections and different parties competed for consent and sympathy. The political mass market, as historian Hans Rosenberg called it, completely changed the rules of politics, which had hitherto been handled by elites. Electoral campaigns became edgier, involving polarizing language, attacks on opponents, and passionate appeals to potential followers. Newspapers took sides and fanned the flames of ideological strife. Journalists joined the ranks of political activists and deployed media power to rally support behind certain candidates while pillorying others.

These developments were aggravated in times of economic crisis, as the end of the 1920s pointedly demonstrated. Emotional politics accrued value rapidly, both in liberal democracies and in totalitarian countries of both communist and fascist colors. Fanaticism, once criticized as the ugly remnant of religious wars, metamorphosed into a widely applauded characteristic of loyal and committed citizens who knew how to distinguish between friend and foe and keep the enemy at bay.

It is therefore no surprise that scholars such as Elias, Huizinga, and Febvre found it difficult to make sense of what they witnessed in their home societies and neighboring countries. They needed help, and at least Febvre thought he might get it from his fellow historians by turning toward a history of sensibilities. At least this is what he asked them to do and what he himself embarked on during his first postwar lectures on “honneur et patrie” (honor and fatherland), concepts that both Vichy France and Charles de Gaulle’s Free France had used as highly emotional catchphrases and mobilizing slogans after 1940 (Febvre 1996).

Other scholars followed Febvre’s lead, even though in small numbers and without much resonance. They included the historians of the *Annales* School, who focused on the history of mentalities and increasingly integrated senses, sentiments, and sensibilities into their analyses (Corbin 1995; Flandrin 1979). In his five-volume study of the “bourgeois experience from Victoria to Freud,” American cultural historian Peter Gay likewise homed in on the “education of the senses” (1984–98). Covering the long nineteenth century and drawing on a wide range of primary sources from European and North American societies, he scrutinized sexual desire, the tender passions of love, the cultivation of hatred, aesthetic tastes, and people’s energetic attempts to discover the secret life of the self. While Gay was more interested in the emotional experience of individuals than in normative prescriptions and regulations, Carol and Peter Stearns embarked on an equally ambitious project of unraveling “emotionologies,” “the attitudes or standards that a society, or a definable group within a society, maintains toward basic emotions and their appropriate expression” (Stearns and Stearns 1985: 813). With a firm footing in social and gender history, they materialized this approach in multiple volumes about American emotional standards as they evolved during the modern period, ranging from jealousy to fear and anger, from parents’ anxiety about child-rearing to coolness as a distinct twentieth-century emotional style.

Interestingly, both Gay’s and the Stearns’ projects largely remained individual enterprises that did not trigger broader disciplinary trends (with a few exceptions: Matt 2003, 2011; Matt and Stearns 2014). At best, they were considered more or less useful additions to social and cultural history, which flourished after the 1960s. It took the profoundly unsettling insights of postcolonial theorizing and the radical idea of cultural relativism to spur a new generation of historians to take an interest in the history of emotions. Reading anthropological studies that, rightly or wrongly, asserted that other cultures’ emotional concepts and practices did not conform to those of the West, historians felt encouraged to study historical sources of emotions in a decidedly non-essentialist way. At the same time, the burgeoning field of neuroscience, assisted by newly available technologies of neuroimaging, ushered in a breakthrough perspective on emotions. Rather than confirming the old European tradition of strictly distinguishing between rational thinking and irrational or emotional feeling, studies delineated the close connection and interaction between the two. Held up against the long devaluation of emotions under the supremacy of reason, such findings served to “ennoble” emotions, investing them with strong cognitive meaning, and vice versa.

Importance Today

Grasping the more recent upsurge in curiosity about the history of emotions, however, necessitates looking outside developments in science and the humanities proper. Historiography does not just draw inspiration from various scholarly disciplines. As with Febvre, it is also influenced by, and takes account of, experiences that are part and parcel of historians' own contemporary culture.

This culture has long been intensely enamored with emotions. Starting with the therapeutic wave of the 1970s and the near obsession with the self, emotions have taken center stage, in self-help literature as well as in the numerous therapeutic cures of body and mind. New social movements discovered and valorized emotions, invoking them to mobilize while at the same time seeking to emancipate them from "repressive" forces such as religion, social mores, and capitalism with its forces of rationalization. This went hand in hand with the perception of emotions as basic, authentic, and non-negotiable. It did not take long for consumer societies and advertising industries to exploit this as a unique selling point. Products sold better if they were candy-coated with positive emotions, and vendors did better when tapping into clients' emotions.

This was what "emotional intelligence" meant. In 1990, two New England psychologists published a paper on how they had, in the late 1970s, measured people's ability to "perceive emotion, integrate emotion to facilitate thought, understand emotions and to regulate emotions to promote personal growth" (Salovey and Mayer 1990). Hidden in scientific journals, this research saw a surge of interest once it was popularized and turned into didactic advice. In 1995, science journalist Daniel Goleman published his book on "E.I.," which was soon translated into forty languages and sold millions of copies. His success prompted him to set up counseling agencies and training labs that have become multi-billion-dollar enterprises. In this sense, emotional intelligence was no longer about "personal growth" but about increased sales figures and leadership skills. It has thus been incorporated into management techniques and is widely used by human resources staff all over the world.

It is also utilized by commercial businesses, above all in advertising. Expanding and flourishing from the early twentieth century as part of fast-growing consumer societies, advertising has been, from the start, closely linked to psychological research. Selling goods is synonymous with selling emotions: this is the mantra that governs the world of Donald Draper and his more or less inventive followers. Some advertising campaigns such as Benetton's invade emotional landscapes in an unusual and surprising manner. Other campaigns take a much more direct approach when goods themselves are labeled as "emotion" (as happens with cars, salads, cosmetics, cat food, etc.).

A more sophisticated and far-reaching approach is currently undertaken by means of affective computing. While online media companies such as Netflix and Amazon access real-time consumer sentiment by closely monitoring people's individual choices and preferences, the MIT Media Lab and its spin-offs go a step further by training computers how to recognize human emotions. These new technologies are not only about improving "human affective experience with technology," as MIT's website informs. It is also about making computers emotionally intelligent and offering new inroads into people's feelings that can (and will) be used by commercial vendors.

Apart from online businesses, there are many more institutions that aim to appeal to or instrumentalize people's emotions. In political culture, emotions abound, with politicians grieving, embracing each other, giving enthusiastic speeches, and eliciting feelings of pride or disdain. They do so more than ever on television, YouTube, and social media. Media, though, not only mediate between the sender and the receiver of messages. Mediation itself is fraught with emotional content, which the twenty-first century underscores on a daily basis. Personal interest stories pervade newspapers, blogs, and TV programs. CNN's anchorman Anderson Cooper was appointed the face of "emo-journalism" when he impassioned covered Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and he has kept to this new breed ever since. Emo-journalism manages to invoke and engage viewers' emotions just as much as it confronts them with other people's emotions and taps into their empathizing abilities. If viewership ratings and sales figures mean anything, the public seems to like it.

“Private” emotions have thus been converted into public emotions “felt” and communicated in public, expressed in a language that is publicly framed, recognizable, and understood. Social media such as Facebook act as powerful intermediaries. Individual users put their emotions on public display and invite extended audiences of “friends” to witness and share them. Since 1982, emoticons and smileys added to individual emails and instant messages have made use of a collective emotional language that is highly formalized and universally applied.

What does that mean for those who study emotions and emotional politics in the humanities and social sciences? How do they approach what they observe in contemporary life, and how do they connect current issues and phenomena to long-term changes and developments?

Approaches differ among disciplines. Literary and media studies often employ a model of emotional behavior borrowed from affect studies. Historians, in contrast, keep their distance and tend to privilege other conceptual tools and methodologies. So, what is it exactly that attracts some and repels others?

All approaches to emotion in the humanities and social sciences strongly borrow from psychology. Replacing philosophers as the long-term monopolists on thinking about and describing emotions, psychologists grabbed the reins around 1900. But they never spoke with one voice. Each attempt to conceptualize emotions met with harsh criticism, and there has never really been across-the-board agreement. Even definitions were and are highly contested. In 2007, eminent psychologist Carroll E. Izard confirmed that “there is no consensus on a definition of the term *emotion*, and theorists and researchers use it in ways that imply different processes, meanings, and functions” (2007: 260). Among the diverse approaches within the fields of psychology and neuroscience, two major strands stand out. One places an emphasis on visceral processes through which emotions are generated and expressed, while the other focuses on emotions as cognitive phenomena. The first classifies emotions, and particularly basic emotions, such as sadness, fear, joy, surprise, anger, and disgust, as “natural kinds” that are given by nature. The second points out the close interplay between emotions, appraisals, and higher order cognition.

This controversy started back in the 1880s, with the James-Lange theory first finding approval and then being panned for putting too much weight on physiological states, as exemplified by William James’s famous quote: “We feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble” (James 2007: 450). During the 1960s, two major theories competed with one another: on the one hand, experimental psychologists Stanley Schachter and Jerome Singer supplemented the James-Lange theory with a “cognitive” component that added context and meaning to the bodily state of excitation. Cognition here exerted “a steering function. Cognitions arising from the immediate situation as interpreted by past experience provide the framework within which one understands and labels his feelings. It is the cognition which determines whether the state of physiological arousal will be labeled as ‘anger,’ ‘joy,’ ‘fear,’ or whatever” (Schachter and Singer 1962: 380).

On the other hand, their colleague Silvan Tomkins singled out an “affect system” that by itself motivated human beings to act in distinctive ways. By focusing on affect rather than on drives, Tomkins sought to distance himself from the then fashionable Freudian school of psychoanalysis. He understood affects as “sets of muscle and glandular responses located in the face and also widely distributed through the body, which generate sensory feedback which is inherently either ‘acceptable’ or ‘unacceptable.’ These organized sets of responses are triggered at subcortical centers where specific ‘programs’ for each distinct affect are stored. These programs are innately endowed and have been genetically inherited.” Thus, affects were not learned. And like drives, they were also not dependent on certain objects: “There is literally no kind of object which has not been linked to one or another of the affects.” Their “innate plasticity” permitted “the investment of any type of affect in any type of activity or object, which makes possible the great varieties of human personalities and societies” (Tomkins 1968: 325–6).

Affect, in Tomkins's view, was thus characterized by its biological-genetic origin in human (and nonhuman) brains, which he thought stored programs for each affect to be triggered and acted out, mostly by facial mimics but also by other bodily behavior: "When we become aware of these facial and/or visceral responses we are aware of our affects. We may respond with these affects, however, without becoming aware of the feedback from them" (Tomkins 1968: 327). Awareness and consciousness are not an integral part of the affect program, which sets it apart from the Schachter-Singer model. Instead, affect and cognition inhabit two separate brain spheres, with affect preceding cognition by the famous half-second (Leys 2017: 324–49).

Tomkins counted eight innate affects: three he deemed "positive" and five "negative." The positive ones were interest/excitement, enjoyment/joy, and surprise/startle; the negative distress/anguish, fear/terror, shame/humiliation, contempt/disgust, and anger/rage. Each affect was identified through its facial response. Paul Ekman borrowed this concept and tried to prove its universality. He eventually came up with six, and then later seven affects that he claimed were shared by all human beings regardless of age, gender, and national belonging. Different cultural backgrounds might matter in singling out different objects that elicited certain affects, he asserted, but the affects themselves were basically invariable and firmly installed in every person's neural system.

During the 1960s, Tomkins's theory did not garner much attention, but it lived on in the work of his students Ekman, Izard, and Virginia Demos, who all gained prominence in the decades to come. They did not necessarily adopt his language, since both Ekman and Izard preferred the more established term emotion over affect. But they all conceived of (basic) emotions as a natural "set of neural, bodily/expressive, and feeling/motivational components generated rapidly, automatically, and nonconsciously." The emotion "preempts consciousness and tends to drive a rather narrowly focused stereotypical response strategy to achieve an adaptive advantage" (Izard 2007: 261–2). Emotions were thus considered "a feeling that motivates, organizes, and guides perception, thought, and action" (Izard 1991: 14).

Some psychologists distinguish between "feeling" and "emotion" and use "feeling" to describe a "consciously detected change in feeling that has sensory qualities," while reserving "emotion" for "a symbolic appraisal of the feeling, often semantic in form," namely, words that interpret or label the feeling (Kagan 2007: 23). Neuroscientists either borrow the distinction or turn it upside down. Antonio Damasio speaks of emotions when he addresses the physical patterns of bodily sensations, but discusses the symbolic, linguistic dimension under the term "feeling" (Damasio 2003). Lisa Feldman Barrett, in contrast, consistently writes "emotion" when she presents her "theory of constructed emotion" and argues that emotions—constructed in the brain—"are in fact made and not triggered" (Feldman Barrett 2017: xiii).

But that contention is questioned by those who embrace and subscribe to what is now called affect theory, which has flourished in the humanities of the new century. After being strongly committed to theories of cultural relativism and social constructionism during the 1980s, scholars in philosophy and literary studies turned to affect as a new—or rather old—concept to make sense of human individuality and action. This turn could not have been more radical, because affect theory contradicts everything that cultural relativism and social constructionism stand for. The latter share the assumption that facts and meanings are created and established through social interaction and convention, while affect theory presupposes a natural-biological given. Affects, in this view, are not artifacts but objective facts that remain beyond the individual's power. They are not learned but inherited, innate, and hardwired. They do something to the person rather than being informed and shaped by the person themselves or their environment. They do not follow the person's intentions and objectives but lead a dynamic life of their own.

This is what philosopher Brian Massumi calls “irreducibly bodily and autonomic,” independent of consciousness and deliberate control. Inspired by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, Massumi defines affect as a “prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act.” Affect thus appears as an experience of unqualified intensity that precedes will and consciousness. It is unformed and unstructured, which sets it apart from both “feelings” and “emotions” (Massumi 1987: xvii; 2002: 23–45).

In a similar vein, the literary scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick adopted the Tomkins-Ekman paradigm of basic affects and introduced it to literary theory and criticism. She, too, found there was something to be gained from a distinctly non-cognitive notion of affect. What seemed particularly attractive was its emphasis on the body and its affective performance (Kosofsky Sedgwick and Frank 1995: 1–28). Poststructuralism’s emphasis on language had largely left out the body because it was considered prelinguistic and pre-cultural. For feminists, reference to the body had been a long-standing taboo since it was equated with “biology” and women’s alleged “nature.” After two centuries of being tied to that nature and how it determined women’s lives and options, feminists of the 1970s and 1980s felt liberated by theories that either left out the body and its materiality altogether or reduced it to a socially constructed artifact.

Others, however, objected to what they criticized as a theoretical straitjacket and discovered the body as a site of resistance and autonomy. To conceive of affects as unintentional, uncontrollable, and autonomous, and to see the body (and face) as the material through which affects made themselves known seemed to promise a novel and productive approach to present and future. Affects were heralded as forces that might resist and transcend social structures; their intensity was seen as harboring the potential to cut through social conventions and agreements and prompt people to act in a way that was unpredictable, non-conformist, and thus, possibly, revolutionary and life-changing. Affect, as Massumi suggested, “holds a key to rethinking postmodern power after ideology” and is “central to an understanding of our information- and image-based late capitalist culture, in which so-called master narratives are perceived to have foundered” (2002: 42, 27).

Theorists also thought that affects offered relief to individuals from the predicament of acting in line with their roles as members of larger groups and societies. If affects struck people independently of who they were and what their intentions and “ideologies”—beliefs, convictions, interests—looked like, they created a singular experience that made everyone different from all others. This, in a paradoxical sway, reinstitutionalized a sense of individuality that had seemingly gotten lost in and by theories that stressed social agreements, group identities, and the social construction of reality. Being part of those socialized and socializing experiences could also be interpreted as lacking in individuality and singularity. Reclaiming individuality through the power of affect, then, could be imagined as an act of resistance, creativity, and radical autonomy—and as a political statement.

In many ways, this statement recalls the main propositions of *Lebensphilosophie* or vitalism as it was developed by Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, and others around 1900. Both Deleuze and Massumi borrowed from that philosophy. Even if history does not repeat itself, it seems necessary to point out analogies and unexpected consequences. To applaud biologically determined “affect systems” and “affect programs” and acknowledge them as a means to potentially change the course of history buys into a concept of political activism that privileges spontaneity over organization, individuality over community, and undiluted affect over directive emotion.

For historians of knowledge, this theoretical move is part of an epistemological program that tends to imbue emotions, affects, and passions with an autonomous agency that “overwhelms,” “grips,” “steers,” and “compels” people to do certain things or refrain from doing them. To some extent, this is reminiscent of ancient beliefs of emotions as demons that take possession of a person and harm her/him and others. But demons usually knew what they were doing and why, while affects in the postmodern sense perform nonideological, chaotic, anarchic work. The fact that both concepts are highly speculative and can hardly be sustained by empirical evidence speaks to the viewpoint that they are, in themselves, highly ideological and serve a certain (political) purpose rather than describing the world as it is.

Where does this leave historians of emotions? What sort of assumptions do they hold, and how do they lend evidence to what they assume and contend?

By profession, historians are—or should be—less prone to imagining the world as they would like it to be. Their sources and methods oblige them to stick to the ground rather than venture into the heavens. At the same time, they do bring their own concepts and visions to their sources and make the latter speak to the former. It seems pretty self-evident that the questions they ask and the methods through which they try to find answers are influenced by their own times and what they witness as citizens of the contemporary world. The stories that they tell depend on how they see the present and what they envision for the future. Still, they do encounter what the historian Reinhart Koselleck once famously called the “veto of the sources.” It is virtually impossible for them to subsume the source material under theoretical propositions that would violate and distort the voices of the past. Since each and every source has to be checked against others, it is essential to formulate readings that do justice to all of them.

Overall, historians consider emotions to be human artifacts that are deeply embedded in culture and thus open to historical change. Even if they are hardwired in the human brain and coordinated with physiological processes in the human body, they are first and foremost shaped by culture. Culture starts with an agreement on language: emotions are not only symbolically represented in and through language; language also gives them social and personal meaning, credence, and weight. Language—which does not stop at words but includes gestures, mimicry, and bodily postures—also allows emotions to be communicated to and shared by others. Without language, emotions would not be known to the person who experiences them. Even if someone initially cannot make sense of what they feel, they usually try hard to label their feeling to act with and upon it. Through language, they can distinguish shades and intensities and even directions of feeling. Wrath feels different to rage or scorn or indignation; love feels different to affection or reverence. Hatred can burn and boil, but also simmer or lie dormant. Each culture has, over many centuries and generations, established repertoires of emotion in more or less nuanced and differentiated forms, and each culture has invested those emotions with meaning and moral judgment. Those meanings and judgments are by no means static but undergo changes in time, space, and social attribution.

Such observations and assumptions can hardly be reconciled with affect theory, which presupposes that “affect systems” and “programs” work unconsciously, individually, and without orientation. At the same time, cultural framing does leave room for individual agency, experience, and spontaneity. Change often occurs when people no longer accept conventional ways of living with emotions and start articulating new “emotional styles” (Gammerl 2012) or “regimes” (Reddy 2001). William Reddy thus aimed to detect the emotional “escapes” sought out by French citizens who had lived through the 1789 Revolution and the following turmoil, while Joachim Häberlen and others found new emotional intensities, experiments, knowledge, and productivity among the 68ers and the generation that followed them. The countercultural “desire for emotions” (Häberlen 2018: 271) unleashed new codes and practices of intimacy and authenticity that gradually seeped through other social strata and institutions and left an imprint on society and culture at large.

Here as everywhere, there was close intertwining between people feeling and doing emotions new or old and knowledge systems that provided them with clues as to how to interpret and act out desires and longings. Contemporary psychotherapy began to play an extremely powerful role in producing and disseminating such knowledge in the 1960s. Discovering emotions as authentic, interior, subjective, undiluted, untainted, and resistant to societal pressures served the goal of honoring them as true markers of individuality and anti-capitalist spirits. Affect theory was already around before they had a name for it.

For historians of emotion, this is a classic case to study to find links between social practices, knowledge systems, and belief structures. They can (and did) go back in time and work on a genealogy of emotion terms and concepts and how these were used for which purpose. As a general rule, earlier vocabularies of feeling were far more varied than those of today. Starting in the 1730s, philosophical lexicons defined affects as motions and movements within the body and soul, whereas passions were seen to be strong desires or appetites that weighed on a person and made them suffer. For Immanuel Kant, who strongly influenced German- and French-speaking philosophers and psychologists up until the early twentieth century, affects were short-lived sensory perceptions that tended to overwhelm the person and disable rational will. As a “surprise through sensation,” they derailed the “mind’s composure.” As “drunkenness,” they left no room for reflection and immobilized “dominion over oneself.” However, this was all limited to a “momentary,” “stormy and transitory” phase. By contrast, passions were thought to be like a long-term and persistent addiction, or, to use a favorite contemporary metaphor, “like a river that digs itself deeper and deeper into its bed.” Passion “takes its time and reflects” and is “always connected” with a person’s “reason.” For Kant, this made it “without exception evil” because the impassioned person did not allow genuine reason to prevail but instead became a slave to her or his appetites (Kant 2006: 150, 165–7).

When such definitions entered encyclopedias as they became fashionable and popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in many European countries and languages, they became known to a broader public. Encyclopedias served, on the one hand, as compendia that made knowledge and information available to nonexperts. They reached an ever-growing readership that was educated and wished to be educated. They accumulated and structured knowledge from various disciplines that would otherwise be restricted to scholars of that discipline only. On the other hand, they had an important standardizing function by presenting definitions, distinguishing the essential from the nonessential, and making judgments. In this way, they became a significant educational medium and offered up normative prescriptions for public use (Frevert et al. 2014).

Thus, it mattered what kind of information and judgment these sources of knowledge conveyed. The shift in the list of emotion words from affects and passions to emotions—which had been considered of French origin and translated, very generally and negatively, as “disturbance of the mind”—reflected a change in disciplinary power as much as in sense-making. Knowing what emotions were supposed to be, how they worked, and how they were judged influenced the way people felt and thought about their feelings. Expert opinions provide great sources for intellectual history. Social and cultural history, though, need media that reach out to broader sections of society and have an impact on how they interpret and practice emotions (Dixon 2003; Plamper 2015: 173–8).

Lexicons and encyclopedias are by no means the only sources that tap into national, language-based repertoires of emotion knowledge. Ego-documents offer more personalized insights into how people understood and expressed their affects, passions, desires, longings, appetites, and emotions, and they might even reflect different, conflicting usages and their respective pros and cons. Legal texts and court cases give evidence of how emotion arguments served the goal to either ameliorate or aggravate judicial sentencing (Kounine 2017) and how, when, and why this changed over the course of time. In some cases, it is possible to trace the impact of certain concepts, for instance that of Gustave Le Bon’s 1895 psychology of the crowd on emotional politics in Italian fascism and German National Socialism (Frevert 2015).

Another approach to analyzing the history of emotions has been to unearth the contextual history of particular emotions such as anger, fear, shame, honor, and empathy. Context here refers to time, space, and social interaction. Different from phenomenologists, historians are interested in the culturally and historically specific work emotions do and how they do it in certain institutional settings. They inquire into when, why, and how societies or social groups engaged in publicly humiliating people and if and under which circumstances those practices induced feelings of shame (Frevert 2020). They trace the history of compassion during the modern period, delineating its limits while probing its development into a culture of humanitarian intervention closely connected to demands for human rights (Assmann and Detmers 2016; Frevert 2011; Hunt 2007). They investigate the causes, experiences, and explanations of fear as it was felt in eighteenth-century Peru and California as well as in contemporary Russian and Indian cities or in the English-speaking world during the long twentieth century (Bourke 2006; Laffan and Weiss 2012; Stearns 2006). Other historians focus on anger and how it was used and performed in medieval societies and beyond (Rosenwein 1998, 2020). Honor and the rituals of aggressive self-assertion in various societies and time periods have been analyzed (Frevert 1995, 2011; Nye 1993; Reddy 1997), and so have emotions such as jealousy and envy, homesickness, and “changing feelings about technology” (Fernandez and Matt 2019; Matt 2003, 2011; Stearns 1989).

This list could go on and on due to the veritable explosion of research in the history of emotions during the last two decades. Some of it has come from literary studies that analyze literary texts while situating them in the environment in which they were produced. As early as the 1970s, scholars were uncovering what they called the “age of sensibility” in the second half of the eighteenth century, a period that saw a surge of novels eliciting strong and compassionate emotions in their readers. Romanticism and the love of nature have likewise received a great deal of attention, as have the cultural theories of distance that emerged after the First World War (Lethen 2002). Historians of science have conducted important studies that shed light on how different disciplines gathered and structured information on emotions (in general and in particular) and thus contributed to producing emotion knowledge that was then put into action by various social, economic, and political actors (Biess and Gross 2014; Dror et al. 2016; Lanzoni 2018; Plamper and Lazier 2012).

For historians, it is a relatively easy task to trace how emotion knowledge was formed in certain disciplines, how it entered social, economic, and political practice, and vice versa, how that practice influenced the way the sciences approached and conceptualized what emotions do. They can distinguish between various emotional styles favored or shunned by democratic, semi-democratic, or undemocratic societies. They can study the techniques through which governments, parties, social movements, media, companies, entrepreneurs, or humanitarian organizations try to elicit, manipulate, and instrumentalize certain emotions for certain ends. They can find out who distributed emotional messages and how these messages circulated and were received by individuals and groups. They can investigate the role of institutions in creating emotional scripts and incentivizing their members to follow those scripts. In this regard, the history of emotions sheds light on how emotions enter into and influence power structures and how they are themselves molded by those structures. In short, what emotions do in and to history is by no means enigmatic. It can be analyzed in about the same way as historians unearth the social role of ideas, ideologies, and concepts, and they can draw on similar sources and methodologies while doing so.

It is not even overly difficult to observe how emotions were formed in a person's head, heart, and body though that person is no longer alive and unable to answer the request for information freely and generously. Sure, historians cannot use fMRIs or hand out questionnaires or engage in participant observation. But they do have access to what people thought and did as long as those people left traces. Ego-documents usually convey detailed information about the process of emotions' formation, both intellectually and viscerally. Take the letter of a 32-year-old man who in 1758 wrote to his close friend in the midst of the Seven Years' War that ravaged central Europe. Both men were living in different places, one in Berlin, the other in a not far-off city that was occupied by French troops. The Berliner's "whole heart" was bleeding, he wrote, and he "trembled" out of fear for his friend. Yet he had not wept until this very moment, when "a tear falls down on my hand." The effect as he described it was twofold: his heart lightened up, and his compassion and fear—that he had already expressed through words—were validated and strengthened by the tear that had evidently been caused by the intensity of writing about his feelings (Frevert 2012: 53).

This source is one of many that allow historians to analyze how emotions worked and what work they were doing. Emotional politics were not invented in the present but have been around for a long time. They have also never been restricted to mass democracies; pre- and nondemocratic regimes have made use of them as well, though in different shapes and with different techniques. At the same time, emotional politics not only emanate from governments or abstract institutions, like religion, schools, or the economy (Schmidt and Conrad 2016). They were and are generated by ordinary people in their daily lives. Even if they do not know it, they follow emotional rules and practices. The aforementioned Berliner knew only too well that it was not enough to put his feelings into words; actions had to follow, tears were necessary to prove and add evidence to what he had verbally expressed. This was not undirected, unintentional, autonomous affect, but a culturally defined emotional program or script that had been internalized by the letter-writer.

Such programs, different in every facet from Tomkins's innate and genetically inherited "affect programs," depended on societal scripts. Clearly, those scripts were never homogenous and doubt-free. A tear in 1758 could have meant multiple things, and it could even have been a false tear. Here, only contextual knowledge helps to clarify its meaning. A century later, however, the tear would not have fallen at all, at least not with male writers. They would, in the meantime, have learned that men were not supposed to weep and cry, but to withhold bodily signs of emotions. Such expressions were supposed to belong to women, children, and uneducated people at home and in the European colonies. In contrast, a grown-up, white, middle-class European man knew what kind of emotions he was supposed to act out and which ones he was supposed to hide, suppress, and keep to himself. Suppressing emotions, though, could turn into a habit that ultimately let those emotions disappear altogether. As experts on theatre as well as philosophers and psychologists had observed since the late eighteenth century, the expression of feelings affected how something was felt or not. There is a strong connection between, to take up Damasio's or Kagan's vocabulary, "feelings" and "emotions"; the symbolic closely influences the somatic. Feelings that are not symbolically represented would find it hard to have an impact on how people behave and act.

In the Future

The history of emotions has been flourishing since the turn of the millennium. Although Lucien Febvre had called upon his fellow historians as early as the late 1930s to take emotions, sentiments, and sensibilities seriously, a long while passed before his call was answered. The 1980s saw some initial individual efforts at adding emotions to the list of topics of professional historiography. But they were not good times for cultural history, and emotions—though very prominent in the younger generation of political activism and counterculture—did not loom large in history departments. Neither social historians nor followers of poststructuralist theory and the linguistic turn were prepared to address them. For the former, they seemed to lack social form and institutional embeddedness. For the latter, they were beyond the scope of narrative plotting and hard to nail down linguistically.

It took another decade or two until a new effort was started to put emotions on the historical map. This time, the effort was more concerted. In 2008, two centers were established—one in Berlin and one in London—that focus on the history of emotions, mostly from the eighteenth century to the present. In Australia, a research center opened in 2011 that concentrates on medieval and early modern emotions. Pulling together junior and senior historians who shared an interest in historicizing emotions was a smart move. It added institutional power and visibility to individual creativity, and it allowed for communication and cooperation in the new field. Workshops and conferences were organized all over Europe and Australia, and major professional journals took account of the new approach and disseminated it through forum discussions to broader professional audiences. Academic presses soon sought to capture the momentum and set up book series to publish monographs and edited volumes in the newly emerging field. Furthermore, there are at least two journals that are dedicated to publishing articles in the history of emotions: *Passions in Context* (established in 2010), and *Emotions: History, Culture, Society* (established in 2017), apart from the more general *Emotion Review* (established in 2009).

The widespread enthusiasm, especially among younger scholars, met with skepticism and resistance from more senior colleagues who set out to question the claims advanced by historians of emotions. Criticism mostly focused on three assumptions: one, that emotions motivate how people act—here, critics judged interests to be more powerful than emotions; two, that emotions are human artifacts that change over time and space—critics doubted both the substance of the claim and that any evidence could be found to support it; third, that emotions can go beyond individual feelings and acquire a social form and force—critics deemed this too speculative. In addition, historians of emotions were criticized for not adding anything new to history in general (“old wine in new bottles”) and lacking a common theoretical foundation.

It is true that grand theory and master narratives do not feature highly on the priorities list of historians who warmed up to the approach. They often employ a patchwork of epistemological concepts such as “emotives” and “emotional regimes” (Reddy 2001), “emotional communities” (Rosenwein 2006), “emotional styles” (Gammerl 2012), “emotional practices” (Scheer 2012), “emotional labor” and “feeling rules” (Hochschild 2003), “affective economies” (Ahmed 2004), or “historical economy of emotions” (Frevert 2011). They also work with shared notions of how emotions function, both in individuals and collectives, and they insist that the concepts of interests or, as suggested by behavioral economists, preferences miss out on the emotional fervor and motivation of why people act the way they did and do.

Putting grand theory and hegemonic narratives aside, historians of emotions have come up with an impressive number of programmatic articles, books, and overviews. They speak to their intellectual ambitions as well as to the state of methodological reflection and interdisciplinary cooperation (Boddice 2018; Matt and Stearns 2014; Nagy and Frevert 2018; Plamper 2015; Rosenwein and Cristiani 2018). And they offer suggestions and trajectories for future research. Connecting the history of emotions to the history of senses could be one of them; not accidentally, “feeling” was, up to the mid-nineteenth century, exclusively defined as the sense of touch. More generally, the body and its profound historical transformations should move to the center of emotion research. If the human body is the main site of emotions, physical regimes are highly likely to affect how emotions are felt and enacted. Medical interventions inform those regimes as much as new work habits, sports, and mobility structures do.

Another question that deserves more attention is what figured as the “other” of emotions in past societies: was it the absence of feeling (Boddice 2019: 131–63), or reason or rationality in Carlyle’s or Weber’s sense? What does the “other” of emotion unveil about how emotions were imagined, conceptualized, and judged? Could it be that defending reason or rationality was a particular type of emotional style rather than its counterpart?

More research could be done on how emotions were embodied and embedded in material culture (Downes et al. 2018; Hillard et al. 2020). Studying systematically and historically the impact of institutions (such as families, schools, the military, the welfare state, etc.) on how emotions were learned and appropriated is a highly promising subject of study and would situate emotions more firmly in the center of historiography. How emotions served to draw lines of distinction between gender, race, or age groups in different time periods, regions, and cultures definitely needs more exploration (Gammerl, Nielsen, and Pernau 2019). Up to now, most research has dealt with European and North American countries, with Asia, South America, and Africa largely left out (Pernau 2019).

Conclusion

To sum up: The history of emotions ascended remarkably over the last two decades, with centers, book series, and journals fostering research and publishing results. Well received by the larger public, it speaks to the significance of emotions in contemporary culture, be it politically, economically, or socially defined. The history of emotions sets out to explain why this is by offering insights into how societies of the past treated emotions (or what were then called affects, passions, drives, appetites, and the like). Affect theory, as it has been developed by modern psychology and embraced by, above all, literary and media studies, does not seem helpful in this regard. It works with assumptions borrowed from evolutionary biology and reduces culture and learning to marginalia. From a historical point of view, it is more rewarding to study the vocabulary of emotions bound to time and space. Such vocabulary influenced and was influenced by emotional practices that should be analyzed for their own sake and in their own grammar rather than being put under the rather narrow umbrella of late twentieth-century theories that are contested in their own domain.

Instead, historians of emotions are best advised to stick to their own methods of critical inquiry. They should, first, diligently analyze sources that speak about people's feelings either with words, pictures, or sounds. They should then contextualize those sources in a wider array of historical references. They should pay attention to the force and function that was attributed to feelings in general and in particular; they should be sensitive to how these feelings were judged and commented on. Moving beyond the individual person, they should be open to researching social groups and institutions and how they utilized emotions. They can thus provide a complex account of how emotions make history at multiple levels.

What is more difficult to investigate are the changes that emotions go through. How does shame as it was experienced in early modern Europe differ from shame felt in late modern societies? Is the fear that people felt during the cholera epidemic of the late nineteenth century similar to the one that contemporaries experience during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020? Was the anger expressed by striking workers in the 1920s different from the anger displayed a century later in industrial relations? These are big questions that are extremely difficult to answer. To find answers, historians have to both meticulously reconstruct and contextualize emotional practices of the past and compare them over time. Up to now, there are only very few studies of this kind. One is Bettina Hitzer's (2020) prize-winning analysis of the emotional politics of cancer during the long twentieth century. Hopefully, more will follow.

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