

Historein

Vol 12 (2012)

Questions and Orientations in History during the last 20 years. Part 1



The idea of culture and the history of emotions

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doi: [10.12681/historein.160](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.160)

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To cite this article:

Petri, R. (2013). The idea of culture and the history of emotions. *Historein*, 12, 21–37.
<https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.160>

Although emotions already had a history in historiography, during the last ten or fifteen years they have achieved a prominent place in historical research. Among the immediate reasons for this may be political conflict, terrorism, warfare and their representation in the mass media as well as the economic crisis and the loss of confidence in the future that characterises present western societies. If compared to the well-ordered world that strategic equilibrium and economic prosperity created after the Second World war, unexpected occurrences seem to offer new proof that “irrational” behaviour and emotion-guided decisions drive history. Another plausible reason relates back to the cultural turn in social sciences and history, which produced new interest both in collective expressions of feeling and personal experience in history.

My essay makes no claim to offer a bibliographical overview; the number of studies is too huge and still increasing. I hope, however, to offer a reasonable itemisation of the three main streams in this field of study: the history of individual emotions, the study of the role that emotions have in historical processes and the reflection on the influence of emotions on history writing. The second part of the article is devoted to the methodological and theoretical status of the study of past emotions. Following the linguistic turn, the majority of the historians of emotion would define themselves as cultural historians. This article will criticise the definition of emotions as merely cultural phenomena. It will go back to earlier debates in historiography, philosophy and social sciences and briefly consider recent research in the humanities and neurosciences. I maintain here that the cultural history of emotions should be able to deconstruct its own history and contextualise histor-

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ically the very paradigms of “culture” and “emotion”, “passion”, “sentiment”, “mood” and the like. The history of emotions should also better explore what emotions are, both by cross-disciplinary debate and theoretical reflection. Otherwise, I argue, it will restrict its own critical potential and remain imprisoned within modernity’s canonical self-descriptions.

Histories of emotions

One of the themes that have long been present in the field of anthropological, religious and social research is that of fear. In history, it was introduced by the studies of Philippe Ariès and Michel Vovelle concerning human attitudes to death.¹ It was then taken up by Jean Delumeau in relation to the sense of guilt and shame arising from the teaching of what he called a religion of anxiety peculiar to the west.² Together with the feeling of shame, at the centre of Duerr’s critical assessment of Elias’ theory of civilisation,³ feelings of guilt and fear are thus among the emotions that are most often returned to. According to Joanna Bourke, who offers a comparative study of the United Kingdom and the United States,⁴ in the modern era new fears have taken over from the obsessions and superstitions of the premodern era, and these new fears gradually alternate with others, clearly in connection with the social, technical, medical and cultural changes that have seen an acceleration over the last century and a half. One of Bourke’s avowed intentions is to compensate for the inadequacy of historians who are trained to provide causal explanations based on the axiom that human behaviour is characterised by an underlying rationality, while the clearly irrational behaviour associated with the influence of emotions and beliefs, being inscrutable, would be left in a cone of shadow.

In this line of reasoning, it is already possible to make out three theoretical and methodological elements that are destined to be considered by most scholars to be standards for historical research into emotions. Firstly, there is a widespread conviction that historical research into emotions can only be cultural in nature, which would essentially mean ignoring supposed anthropological and biological “constants” in order rather to focus, more appropriately, on emotions and changing sentimental contexts which, as such, are considered purely cultural phenomena. As Peter Stearns points out in his *American Fear*, even if we wished to ignore the fact that the same notions that designate a feeling are subject to change insofar as they are culturally determined, and therefore assume that a given feeling can remain unresponsive to time, the fact “that its public context has altered, and that policies based on this context have shifted dramatically as well”⁵ would nevertheless remain. What is needed, then, is a cultural history of emotions – albeit one understood in a broad sense – which does not merely look at how changing social contexts and beliefs change concrete expressions of the feeling under scrutiny, but also at how such displays of feeling, through social and cultural norms stemming from different politics of feeling, become part of the development process of individuals, ending up conditioning their most intimate behaviours.

Dealing therefore not with fear but with “American fear”, Stearns underlines a second methodological commandment for the history of emotions: comparison in a diachronic and synchronic sense. As the changeableness of emotions is grasped through the collective display of them, it is necessary to carefully compare different ages and different national, religious and social contexts,

that is to say, “different cultures”. Thirdly, the aversion to the reason/emotion dichotomy is unanimous. Often, however, it is professed by those who are not able to escape it. Many authors limit themselves to stating that “emotion need no longer be opposed to rationality, but rather interacts with it”,⁶ or to pointing out that the “sentimental aspect” is equally as necessary as that of rational action, in order to provide convincing explanations of the past.

What emotions are liable to historical inquiry? Psychology has concentrated its research on the so-called “negative” emotions of which we have already made mention: “Emotions like fear, anger, sadness, and disgust have taken centre stage in both theory and research, whereas emotions like joy, contentment, interest, and love have played only mirror roles”.⁷ The first histories of emotions, too, closely followed such a scheme. However, subsequently, considerable attention was paid to “positive” emotions as the *primum movens* of many socially structuring behaviours.

Using a methodologically well-considered cultural philology approach, Adam Potkay examines how joy has been dealt with over the centuries by western literature, art, philosophy, religion, psychology and politics, while also allowing himself a few comparative glances at Islamic and Asian texts.⁸ It is hard to say whether the complex set of emotions that can be associated with love can be unambiguously placed in the “positive emotions” column. In any case, the sentimental and relational implications of love have variously taken their place among the subjects of historical inquiry. The relationship between parents and children, between the sexes, sexuality and its rules by way of laws, religious commandments and customs, which condition the “feeling of love”, lie at the heart of various studies of political, social, cultural and gender history, to which in some cases we shall return. Amorous discourse has an influence on “forms of consent, on the contents of propaganda and education, on the construction of common sense and of mentality”. Consequently, “anyone who manages politics must bear in mind affections in seeking to put forward a model that is social and ethical at the same time”.⁹ It is for these reasons that Anna Tonelli has provided a stimulating study on the sentimental education perpetrated by Italy’s three main parties during the postwar period. Luisa Passerini and her research group also examine the various forms of amorous sentiment, highlighting the importance of romantic, courtly love for the creation of a sense of belonging to Europe, while at the same time calling its exclusively European character into question.¹⁰

A frequent topic in histories of emotions concerns their transformation in modern times, which has advanced along with the great social and economic transformation that characterised the west between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. As the Scottish moral philosopher Adam Smith and other eighteenth-century thinkers knew, sentiments not only are “the objective of economic striving, they are also the adjunct of economic exchange”.¹¹ Pleasure and avarice, envy and gratitude, uncertainty and confidence can thus be studied as sentimental reasons behind economic change. And so Ute Frevert sets out to show how trust and confidence – “positive” emotions of primary economic and social importance – are a modern invention. What seems a requirement for all interhuman cooperation is, according to the author, subject to cultural, historical and social differentiations. Seeing how the sentiment of trust develops through history is unquestionably a topic of great importance. Yet, reading that “this obsession with trust is a central feature of modernity. Trust, so to speak, has been invented in and by modernity”,¹² the thought occurs that it might make a significant difference if we ask whether, apart from inventing trust, modernity has also created

an obsession with it. It is, however, a difference which the author does not seem to take into account. The impression that one gets from this and other texts is rather that modernity itself is the obsession of many historians of emotions.

Emotions: the driver of history

In addition to the cultural histories of individual emotions and feelings or apparently related groups of feelings, such as fear, anxiety and dread on the one hand or joy and pleasure on the other, one might review another type of study that has proliferated of late and which adopts a different perspective. It asks, essentially, what contribution a study of emotions, or discourses concerning emotions, might make in order to better explain historical economic, social, political and religious phenomena previously analysed almost without regard to the emotional dimension. In a certain sense, here, the perspective is reversed: while in histories of emotions, emotions appear to be more in tow with general historical changes such as “modernisation”, in this case they become active agents and potentially independent variables in the aleatory combinations of historical change.

Emma Rothschild has conducted a broad survey of the “economic sentiments” discussed in the eighteenth century by Smith, Condorcet, Hume, Turgot and other eminent thinkers in a period which was confronting the discourse of *laissez-faire* as the most pregnant new development among those decreed by economic and social transformations, and in which “uncertainty [was] the overwhelming condition of commercial society”.¹³ The book is about how these authors deal with fear, apprehension, attraction, pleasure, envy, trust and the search for certainty, as well as with the sense of justice, with the demand for equality, with frugality and sobriety, with evaluations of risk, with the notions of utility and wealth – in short, with phenomena that in previous historical literature had tended to be filed under entries such as values, virtues and mentality more than under sentiments. It is difficult, however, to maintain that the choice of a value, the option for virtuous behaviour or the mental conditioning of a milieu are devoid of emotion,¹⁴ and this expansion to some of the subjects of traditional cultural history speaks in favour of adopting a historical-cultural approach to emotions.

Along the same lines, there are many studies of collective emotions: for example in the sphere of geopolitical history,¹⁵ in that of gender history and of feelings of femininity or masculinity¹⁶ or those that aim to explain the enigmas of national and patriotic faith.¹⁷ A recent work examines the use which memory and politics make of the sentiment of nostalgia, which a commentator chose to call the “engine of history”.¹⁸

Sentimental historiography

It was Ranke’s chief concern that a historian’s present should not interfere with the authenticity of sources but, on the contrary, render the “life” of the past through them as authentically as pos-

sible.¹⁹ The effort to objectify historical inquiry was then extended – for example by Max Weber – to the conscious control of interferences by inevitable value judgments.²⁰ Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a historiographical current emerged which, in contrast, identified at the level of psychological constants and primordial symbolic forms the fertile ground on which empathy, with the experience of ancestors, was to be cultivated. According to Dilthey, this effort can lead to a sublime form of comprehension of the past.²¹ Aby Warburg believed it was possible for the later-born to capture the mood of ancestors through “a kind of bodily, iconic thought that conflates inner psychic states with outer gesture”.²²

The linguistic turn and cultural history have stated that every discourse regarding the past, including scientific discourse, contains an unavoidable residue of arbitrariness. The symbolic order of a narration does not reproduce the events of the past but “colours” our way of looking back by charging them with emotional meanings.²³ Speaking about the epistemology of historical knowledge, therefore, the subjectivity of the inquirer comes into play. By not reconstructing, but constructing, such events, his/her history writing consists “of toing and froing between present and past, between familiarity and estrangement”.²⁴ The category of trauma became central in twentieth-century historical culture, displaying such a degree of estrangement that it no longer permits any sense to be attributed to the past. Yet, the need to keep its memory alive for the purpose of “historical conscience” urges us in any case to seek familiarity with the people and objects that have been lost. As Rüsen argues, “we should realise that historical thinking itself, by its very logic, follows the logic of mourning, at least partly in a formal way; it renders the absent past, which is a part of one’s own identity, present again”.²⁵ At this point, with a historiography driven by the desire for identity, history and memory once again appear to converge into a tale through which the object mourned can be preserved and made to seem close in the imagination.²⁶ The practices in question are nevertheless aware of an unavoidable estrangement from past experience.

Other scholars desire to bridge this ultimate divide by restoring to the present the emotions of the past “which crisscross the exuberant sphere of memory”. According to Tarpino, as these emotions form the “existential background of the historian’s work”, they can mediate between the historian and him/herself and the collective imaginary of the past he/she wants to give his voice to.²⁷ Frank Ankersmit comes to a still more radical expression of the same desire, when he asks:

Can we rescue the past itself from how we speak about it? More specifically, can the historian enter into a real, authentic, and “experimental” relationship to the past – that is, into a relationship that is not contaminated by historiographical tradition, disciplinary presuppositions, and linguistic structures such as identified by Hayden White in his *Metahistory* of 1973? When asking ourselves this kind of question, we have to do with “subjective experience”, that is, with the historian’s experience of the past. And then the crucial question is whether it is (historical) experience that may enable us to break through the walls of “the prisonhouse of language”.²⁸

As a response, the author suggests “a rehabilitation of the romanticist’s world of moods and feelings as constitutive of how we relate to the past. How we feel about the past is no less important than what we know about it – and probably even more so.”²⁹

Ankersmit openly rejects the way in which, in White's words, "history in the early nineteenth century succeeded in constituting itself as a scientific (or parascientific) discipline" by detaching historiography "from its millennial association with rhetoric and, after that, from *belles lettres*". The professional historian began to abhor all "kind of writing that was more 'creative' or 'poetic', in which the imagination, intuition, passion, and, yes, even prejudice were permitted to take precedence over of considerations of veracity, perspicuity, 'plain' speech, and commonsense".³⁰ Despite academic austerity, in popular historical culture many mythical and imaginary as well as sentimental elements persist. If the historian thinks that his or her expertise "has value for the world beyond the classroom and scholarly journal" and that it may stimulate "critical thinking" and "contribute to our knowledge of our neighbours and ourselves",³¹ how can he or she proceed? By railing in a sterile manner against widespread mystifications or else, rather, seeking to be more in tune with the shared feeling of society by practising "new forms and channels of communication"?³² This way, then, lies a hope connected as much to the history of feelings as to the feeling of history: the hope of rendering the past more accessible to later generations through the space of the emotional experience of their ancestors. Now, tuning in to widespread feelings in order to recount that past which it is exciting to hear being recalled can, without a doubt, increase the historian's audience in the era of global communication. Yet, when the purpose of this inclusion is critical of society's shared feelings, the question of what the right terms are with which to attempt to approach the history of emotions is inevitably raised.

Nature, culture, society

Today, with regard to feelings, the paths of social history and cultural history converge. One reads in a textbook introduction to social history:

If the categories of fear, of darkness, of love, of childhood, of illness, of deviance, of space were in the past different from our own, these categories and the behaviours and emotions to which they gave rise must be contextualised. In other words, we shall have to understand in what way our more or less distant ancestors lived with their feelings, with the imaginary, with their mental constructions and the view of the world that accompanies them in daily life.³³

It is a question of tearing off the veil of distinction between "high culture" and "popular culture" that pervaded study practices in the past, casting into oblivion the lived experience of the hosier, the cropper, the weaver, of the humble and vanquished of history.³⁴ A veil which, according to Frevert and Schmidt, is founded on a "contraposition of feeling and reason" which "since the Enlightenment has impregnated western thought", and ends up "reproducing the well-known social labels and classifications".³⁵ It should be considered, however, that, as Remotti notes, "the essential difference between the traditional and modern notion arises from the absence or presence of customs and habits as specific contents of culture".³⁶ Indeed, it was precisely the Enlightenment anthropology of the Condorcets and Herders which not only considered, on the one hand, "rational" action a prerogative of the bourgeoisie but also, on the other, saturated the concept of culture with an unprecedented glorification of popular sentiments.

Vis-à-vis the traditional statement of “the inadequate development of rational capacities among the subaltern classes”,³⁷ the opposition of feeling and reason has become the target of widespread criticisms since it places individuals and social groups on different scales of civilisation. Most of the criticisms, however, leave concepts such as “reason” and “civilisation” intact, rebelling against the idea of “invariant aspects of emotion”. Perhaps they exist, says Stearns, but they cannot be studied by the historian. Emotions always contain “a mixture of ingrained impulse and a degree of cognition that evaluates and, to some degree, regulates the same impulse; and cognition, in turn, is shaped by cultural cues as well as the vagaries of individual personalities”.³⁸ Thus it would be a matter of studying – essentially in the manner of Elias – the social and cultural mechanisms that regiment innate impulses. The idea that neuroscience could help historians in their work on emotions³⁹ is fiercely opposed by a majority of scholars. As Marxist biologist Hollitscher already pointed out, “proof cannot be found to substantiate the theory which has it that modern man’s contingent, individual or social “aggressiveness . . . is biologically programmed”.⁴⁰ So as not to cram this paragraph exceedingly with quotations of similar tenor, we shall conclude it with Frevert and Schmidt’s sceptical comment regarding the contribution of neuroscience to the visual turn in the human sciences, insofar as “neuroscience implies that something like a universal visual experience exists, whereas anthropologists and art historians have shown that this is not the case. What we define as ‘seeing’ is culturally determined, as are the meaning and importance that we attribute to this mode of perception.”⁴¹

A self-portrait of modernity

What if the contraposition of nature and culture, of body and soul, of innate and acquired itself represented one of the limits imposed on the historian’s critical potential? Is it not, perhaps, precisely from this that the distinction between reason and emotion bemoaned by Frevert and Schmidt stems? I believe that a historiography that aims to be “cultural” can respond to this order of questions only if it is willing to reflect on its own limits by understanding itself as a result of historical changes.

Often, however, such reflectiveness appears to be lacking. Thus, bodily manifestations linked to feelings tend to be removed beyond the confines of historical inquiry. Studying the history of sexuality, Stearns admits that “biology is not an absolute constant”, not without adding, however, that it “introduces complexities into human sexuality”, thus placing, once again, the specific “human” in a typically cultural dimension and, as such, opposed to the natural one. It is not surprising, therefore, that the thread that runs through his account is the “tension between biological capacity and social needs”.⁴² Once again, therefore, the *animal culturans* makes history in order to curb its own instincts. Much more reflective appears Potkay, who places the cultural paradigm in its historical context from the inside, so to speak, when he deals with “indescribable feelings”, which anthropologists see as a constitutive element of communication.⁴³ By retracing the origin and function of discourses regarding the impossibility of finding the right words, he highlights how it is interpreted “as a transition from that which is presentable to that which is not, revealing the gap between sign and meaning. This gap is partly rooted in religious discourse, where it reflects

(or posits) the incommensurability between ordinary human experience, including language, and the experience of divinity.”⁴⁴

Note that in the two examples just quoted, the interface between man and transcendence is set on two apparently opposite sides: in the latter it involves feeling, while in the former it involves reasoning. That the opposition in question is not absolute is suggested by the allegorical iconography of the French Revolution which transforms Reason into a goddess: it does not matter whether it is intended as nature's inspiration in the manner of Voltaire or as divine animation in the manner of Kant, it nevertheless takes on the function of proving the elevation of the species by conferring a transcendent sense upon its being in the world. The very same function is often attributed to the rebellion against the diktat of reason which would obscure the authentic experience of man. Ankersmit makes an evident return to this romantic lament when he writes that “both the Enlightenment and ‘theory’ resulted in icy formalism, freezing all that may move the human heart . . . So let us restore to our thinking about history and about historical writing at least something of the warmth of the human heart and of what has a resonance in the depths of our souls.”⁴⁵ These words recall Novalis' famous pamphlet of 1799, in which he attacks the execrable *philosophes* for declaring “heresy imagination and sentiment, morality and love of art” and trying to “cleanse nature, the earth, the human soul and science of all poetry”; while the French Revolution in any case provided the signal for a great regeneration, bringing back into favour passion, feeling, the sacred and veneration.⁴⁶

If truth be told, the invective in the defence of feelings against the cold dictatorship of reason was not so original even at the time. Enlightenment anthropology itself⁴⁷ and humanism before it already provided for the eulogy of passion, insofar as it is a repository of a more authentic dimension. Romanticism's break with the Enlightenment, if not pure chimera at all, in any case did not regard this central motive. According to Richard Strier, “it is often taken as a basic truth about the whole ‘Western Tradition’ that the control of ‘passion’ by ‘reason’ is its fundamental ethical-psychological ideal”. The problem with this view is that it “obscures another strand in ‘the tradition’: the praise of passion”. The two strands “exist in opposition and complex interaction”.⁴⁸ According to Victoria Kahn, the use of “passions” often represents a political calculus rather than a genuine opposition to “reason”. “It's not so much the passions as the *representation* of the passions that preoccupies those writers of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century who are reflecting on problems of political obligation and the preservation of the state.” Thus, the representation of passions proves to be “an instrument of sophistic rhetoric, designed to create the effect not only of obedience but also of consent”.⁴⁹ The new development which Novalis expressed two centuries later in fact is not the eulogy of passions but rather their unprecedented potential as generators of consensus in the era of peoples. His was a farsighted intuition, in relation to the principles of modern mass communication.

Reason and emotion therefore are certainly “born” different, but only to the extent that the twin daughters of the same great narrative, or two brushstrokes in the same self-portrait of modernity, may be different.

The thing called emotion

Yet, what is an emotion, what is passion, what is a feeling, then? Until now I have used such expressions in a *naïf* manner, almost as if they were synonyms. And perhaps, to some extent, they are. It is worth reflecting on them, accepting Serena Ferente's invitation to historians to "go beyond the study of representations or discourses as far as emotions themselves".⁵⁰ The paths that lead beyond the confines of cultural history nevertheless prove to be bristling with difficulties. With regard to emotions, both within and between disciplines, a broad range of voices prevails, made even more chaotic by the various specialised languages and linguistic contexts. In short, there are no standard, universally acknowledged answers about what is called emotion. Yet it is worth venturing further into the maze, pitting oneself against it, deciding on the greater or lesser plausibility of the various concepts from the viewpoint of the historian.

An initial crossroads regards the western philosophical tradition, which since ancient times has reflected on emotional phenomena from at least two different angles. One concerns their ontological statute, while the other concerns their symbolic content. I have the impression that for the historian it is a useful enterprise to delve into the debate around ontological definitions, while attempting to pick one's way through the changing interpretive taxonomies of feelings, developed by psychoanalysis in particular, brings no great benefit. The precarious hierarchies of "basic" and "derived" feelings, of symbols, metaphors and dream interpretations, the several hundreds of freely multiplying terms for "different" feelings seem arbitrary and easily adaptable to any sort of mystification.⁵¹ Sailing by sight between such "archipelagos", some psychologists appear to give vent to their own anthropological and historical prejudices which then – where they are shared – risk giving the historian a sort of spurious circular confirmation of his or her findings. To provide an example of the problem I wish to refer to here, it could be said that psychoanalysis, inasmuch as it is an "expression of bourgeois sensibility",⁵² is not structurally capable of falsifying the hypothesis of a "growing articulation of the need to individualise the Self, commencing from modernity".⁵³ It therefore has difficulty in recognising how this idea of individual identity, with the accompanying conjectures regarding species, instinct, nature, infancy and subjectivity, have been used by post-Enlightenment pedagogy to weave the emotional thread of the "individualised self" tightly into the political collective fabric.⁵⁴

Following the other path would seem to be more fruitful. The many attempts to answer the question of what a feeling or an emotion is, irrespective of its specific content, cannot be discussed here. However, a brief mention is in order. It should be stated from the outset that these debates, too, do not lead to a certain conclusion. Yet in any case, they enable general structures and dynamics of emotional phenomena to be distinguished, allowing certain interdisciplinary considerations that escape the circularity described above.

However, here too there is no lack of problematic aspects. Starting with the fact that since Aristotle's time the cognitive and motivational properties of *pathos* have been placed within a bipolar scheme, according to which emotion represents the reverberation that mental excitation generates at the bodily level and bodily excitation at the mental level. Ancient philosophy therefore pointed out the "compositional intricacy, which involves body and mind, cognition and desire, perception and

feeling”,⁵⁵ leading scholasticism to demand that *virtus* and *ratio* regiment the sentimental, instinctive – albeit inevitable – conditioning of human behaviour.⁵⁶ This has originated an interminable debate around the relationship between feelings and emotions, and the place of the latter in the chain between perceiving, forming a judgment, deciding and acting.⁵⁷ Despite many behavioural and cognitive psychologists abandoning the concept of *reason* – which for William James represents nothing other than a *feeling* of familiarity⁵⁸ – many preserve the paradigm of rational decision-making, with emotions having a neutral or negative influence on “rationality”, never a consolidating one.⁵⁹ For neuroscience and emotion studies, instead, the concept of rationality seems to lose any usefulness as a parameter, while emotions are granted a decisive role for every cognitive process.⁶⁰ Within the social, psychological, neurological and psychiatric disciplines, the once-opposing theories according to which emotions are either the expression of an innate programme of action or social and cultural constructs appear to have converged, giving rise to multiple-process models of emotion or to functional approaches.⁶¹

The psychiatrist and philosopher Louis Charland has conducted a careful examination of the not-always convergent ways in which the founders of modernity such as Hume, Crichton, Kant or Ribot understood notions such as passion, emotion, feeling, sentiment or mood.⁶² Around this terminology, various contrasting schools of thought exist. Take, for instance, the divergent labels assigned by philosophers in the English-speaking world to the concept of emotion, on the one hand, and feeling, on the other: in the tradition of the behaviourist school, the latter expresses the physical experience of a change of state, while emotion is the perception, or representation, of that stimulus. For those operating in the Aristotelian vein, feelings and emotions are both tantamount to intentional dispositions of the soul towards the “exterior world”.⁶³ Meaning gaps are also registered in translating from one language to another or from one specialist jargon to another. Sociologists, for example, seem rather unresponsive to philosophical distinctions between feeling and emotion. At most they seem to concede that emotions and feelings “are not always identical” as “emotions are experienced primarily as structures of feeling which give rise to relational experience”.⁶⁴ Both of them, however, belong to a sphere of social relations “in which the subject of the relationship, the person in the relationship, is in some way changed, and, in being so changed, is disposed to change the relationship itself”.⁶⁵

This rapid glance at the debates in various subject areas shows that we are a long way from an unequivocal definition of “the thing called emotion”. The aspect of subjectivity or the subject/object relationship, however it is conceived, is nevertheless an initial point to bear in mind for our final considerations. Many in addition underline the difference between emotions and moods,⁶⁶ and there are also those who translate “mood” as Heidegger’s *Befindlichkeit*.⁶⁷ Here we need merely to limit ourselves to understanding, as a second fundamental aspect to be evaluated, the very given of a temporal stratification of emotional phenomena.

Subjectivity: a mass phenomenon

If there are areas of intersection between disciplines into which the historian of emotions ought to usefully venture, in my view they are precisely those which regard the relational and subjective

character, as well as the temporal stratification, of emotional phenomena. All phenomena in the emotional sphere seem to be linked to changes that occur in the pre-existing associative status between different entities. Carlotta Sorba has noted “historiography’s renewed attention towards the subjective dimension” and pointed out how the historical change in feelings can “tell us something about transformations in subjectivity over time, on which cultures construct models of personality and their relationships with the social context. It is a perspective which opens up significant rifts regarding the relationship between the individual, politics and society.”⁶⁸

It is a perspective of great interest, but to pursue it I feel however that it is useful to contextualise and understand historically those cultures that produce notions of subjectivity: for example, the notion according to which the individual, as the seat of the soul, possesses the (worldly) exclusive on subjectivity. According to this interpretation, feeling is a kind of private property which manifests itself in relating to others on the basis of free negotiation. As this vision is culturally constructed, preceded and therefore coexists with others, it cannot represent the only space within which the history of emotions can legitimately operate. At this point, it seems useful to consider the biological aspects of feeling as well: neurosciences and cognitive psychology, for example, defy in many ways “the barrier between subjective and objective”.⁶⁹ It is necessary “rather to think” – writes Ferente – “about the idea of emotional communities . . . that share a certain regime of emotions, or emotional style, or are defined by it”.⁷⁰ Nineteenth- and twentieth-century European sociology had already discussed collective feelings intensely. There were those such as Weber or Simmel who defended – in different ways – methodological individualism, deeming that society’s emotional state was a product stemming from the interaction of individuals, and those such as Comte and Durkheim who felt that through such interaction a separate, new subjectivity would be engendered. In the mass, Le Bon had written, “conscious personality vanishes and the ideas and feelings of all individuals are oriented in the same direction. A collective soul is formed, which is doubtless changeable, but with very clear characteristics.”⁷¹ Generally critical of theories suggesting society was an aggregate of individuals, French sociologists “viewed the social whole as an organism”.⁷²

These are thoughts which, according to the conclusion usually drawn from subsequent historical developments, would constitute harbingers of totalising conceptions of society. Yet this is a correct statement only on the basis of the assumption that the organism is a discrete, closed system. Several scholars of the same period conversely had already sowed the seeds of doubt that the body was not the undisputed master of its own interior excitation. Vygotskij’s assertion that “man’s psychological nature represents the set of social relations that have been transported to within and have become functions of personality and forms of its structure”⁷³ opened up the interior world to the influence of social relations, and Uexküll’s ethology extended this principle beyond the way animal species communicate to a generic world of objects, of which the interior world ended up being a mirror.⁷⁴

However, the most convincing solution in my view is offered by Mead, for whom the mind should not be conceived of at all as an interior dimension but rather as a field of social interaction *par excellence*, where the “social” is considered by him to be a universal relational principle between any sort of subjects/objects. As a consequence, the self “is not so much a substance as a process in which the conversation of gestures has been internalised within an organic form. This process does not exist for itself, but is simply a phase of the whole social organisation of which the individ-

ual is a part.”⁷⁵ This organisation is immersed in an evolution which through the development of the nervous system has enabled certain organisms to refine their sensory and brain capacities to the point that they are able to process distance. Thus simultaneous and body-to-body contact has been joined by sensory and memory capacities capable of simulating stimuli and anticipating the act. It is with the development of spatio-temporal deferment, its moving from the past to and beyond the present, that the organism’s sense evolves into conscience and sentiment.⁷⁶

The evolutionistic derivation of emotions therefore lies at the intersection between the temporal and relational dimension, opening the way to a different conception of subjectivity too. On the one hand, one encounters the thinking of Bourdieu, according to whom personal identity is “an assemblage of objective relations that have united the actor with the group of other actors”⁷⁷ and which is cemented by biographical illusion and other processes of memory.⁷⁸ On the other, this temporal dimension ties in with the conception – corroborated in the philosophical field by Ben-Ze’ev⁷⁹ and in the neurological field by Damasio⁸⁰ – of “emotion as a memory process”.⁸¹ It is clear how, on the basis of such considerations, feeling takes on a truly central role in the construction as much of the person as of society as well as their changing over time. And it is clear that this appraisal lies at the polar opposite of the myth according to which emotions are in mysterious tune with the unfathomable profundity of being in the world.

The explanation of feelings as a mode for organisms to process the inevitable spatio-temporal deferment in relating to their environment also fits with a different conception of subjectivity compared with the one deriving from transcendent Reason bestowed on the individual as a gift.⁸² Human subjectivity appears more like a specific manifestation of a general principle of the becoming of all complex entirities to which, in accordance with our logical capacities, we can only refer in terms of irreducible arbitrariness, of choice, or of dynamic self-organisation which is underpinned by a reflexivity engendered by memory, or – in short and simply put – subjectivity.⁸³ The best modelling of the emotional phenomenon that I am aware of lies within an overall vision of this type: Tracy Mayne and James Ramsey record the emergence and attenuation of an emotional phenomenon over time, its place in the temporal stratification of moods and feelings, its bodily manifestations and the complex social interactions that are connected with it, in an open, intersystemic environment whose characteristics prove themselves to be perfectly compatible with historical becoming.⁸⁴

It is clear how decisive mass phenomena are for a concept of subjectivity such as this, which makes it also simpler to conceive of a collective subjectivity engendered by memories and emotions, which does not mean depicting society as a “monolithic” organism. The exact opposite is correct: of all the places known to us, it is precisely the human body that best expresses subjectivity as a mass phenomenon. Might the source of the systemic, self-organising complexity of brain functions⁸⁵ and the capacity to take decisions that cannot be reduced to deterministic causality not be the enormous number of chaotic binary connections? From this perspective, the fences erected along the continuum of relations between individuals, society and environment look like artifices, the cultural and ideological induction of which we should have historical awareness.

Conclusion

I hope to have made a number of points in support of the thesis according to which an exclusively “cultural” approach to the history of feelings represents a certain limit which needs to be overcome with tools for cross-disciplinary study. If past reality as reconstructed by the historian constitutes, like all other realities, the “reduction of a completely open, indefinable complexity”,⁸⁶ the utility of splitting the subject of the analysis into one dimension which is variable and dynamic, and another which is constant and unalterable, one historical and the other atemporal, one cultural and the other natural, fails. The perspective which during the historical research process leaves open “an exit from culture towards realities which somehow precede it or lie at its foundations”⁸⁷ is therefore preferable.

Why is it important to use that door regularly, in order to leave and come back in? In my view, it is necessary in order to conserve greater critical capacity in the face of the burden of normative philosophical postulates that weigh down on the historical phenomena which the history of emotions aims to study. To give an example, while on the one hand it is possible to highlight, by means of a cultural history approach, how the sentiment of nostalgia was born in the modern era and expresses an unease which modernity with its multiple accelerations imposes on the individual, engendering in him/her a sense of disorientation,⁸⁸ on the other the evolutionist dialectics of a Mead and the clarifications regarding neurosciences of a Marcus help us to understand how emotion-based interpretations of the “alienating” conditions of an inevitable spatio-temporal deferment are first and foremost typically philosophical and ideological which modernity credits to its own account, in order to stabilise not only social and power hierarchies, but also the great eschatological tale inherent in modern discourse.⁸⁹

If truth be told, this ideal building displays certain cracks even when, with the tools of cultural history, it is placed within a long-term perspective, for instance by observing human behaviour in the face of death over centuries and millennia; or when, as a test of Elias’ theories, Duerr’s studies into shame neither reveal increasing civilisation of certain impulses nor prove any “anthropological constant”, but highlight such a contingent variety in social dispositions towards those feelings that any teleological narration is rendered arduous. Thus, in highlighting certain limits of cultural history and of the very concept of culture itself, I certainly did not wish to disparage its merits and potential. Not least because, despite arguing strongly in favour of crossovers between disciplines, I have also indicated the traps involved. Indeed, the risk that from the depths of other subjects, whether humanistic or scientific, one obtains a reassuring return based on shared philosophical paradigms is considerable. In this case the cross-disciplinary comparison is of little value as a testing ground for historical inquiry. It is necessary, therefore, in any case, to face up to the burden of carrying out an in-depth theoretical and interdisciplinary consideration.

NOTES

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