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# Choices in the History of Emotions<sup>2a</sup>

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**Abstract. Objective/Context:** The text focuses on pointing out some of the top challenges that the history of emotions currently faces in light of the contributions the field of study has produced from its creation. **Methodology:** To the extent that the field of history of emotions continues to expand, it is vital to bear in mind that the contributions will be different if the people who work from this standpoint focus, for example, on the individual or the social framework; on events or processes; on specific emotions or their articulation with historical processes; on specific audiences or a broader public; on unique geographical contexts or comparative reflections on different ambits. **Originality:** The piece presents a balance on the main methodological, thematic, and theoretical challenges faced by academics who work from the perspective of the history of emotions, at a time when the field has reached a high level of sophistication, and suggests synthetically a series of work pathways that point to strengthening the contributions made from this field of study. **Conclusions:** This reflection concludes that the history of emotions can progress in different directions and that the varied analytical alternatives at the disposal of historians devoted to this field have the potential to affect different types of audiences, within and without the specific sphere of emotions, and to solidify the contribution made from the field to knowledge in general. One of the main questions this paper highlights is the pressing need for further studying emotions in geographic areas outside the United States, Europe, and Australia, among which Latin America stands out as an important one.

**Keywords:** emotions, history of emotions, methodology.

## Alternativas en la historia de las emociones

**Resumen. Objetivo/Contexto:** El texto se centra en señalar algunos de los principales retos que afronta la historia de las emociones en la actualidad a la luz de los aportes que el campo de estudio ha producido desde su creación. **Metodología:** En la medida en que el campo de la historia de las emociones sigue expandiéndose, es importante tener presente que los aportes serán distintos si las personas que trabajan desde esta óptica se enfocan, por ejemplo, en el individuo o en el marco social; en los acontecimientos o en los procesos; en emociones específicas o en su articulación con procesos históricos; en audiencias puntuales o en públicos más amplios; en contextos geográficos singulares o en reflexiones comparativas sobre distintos ámbitos. **Originalidad:** El escrito presenta un balance sobre los principales retos metodológicos, temáticos y teóricos que enfrentan los académicos que trabajan desde la perspectiva de la historia de las emociones, en un momento en el que este campo ha alcanzado un alto nivel de sofisticación, y plantea de forma sintética una serie de rutas de trabajo que apuntan a fortalecer los aportes que se hacen desde este campo de estudio. **Conclusiones:** Esta reflexión concluye que la historia de las emociones puede avanzar en distintas direcciones y que las variadas alternativas analíticas a disposición de los historiadores dedicados a este campo tienen el potencial de incidir en distintos tipos de audiencias, dentro y fuera del ámbito particular de las emociones, y de afianzar el aporte que desde el campo se hace al conocimiento en general. Una de las principales cuestiones en las que se hace énfasis es la apremiante necesidad de estudiar emociones en áreas geográficas por fuera de Estados Unidos, Europa y Australia, entre las que América Latina se destaca como una de las más importantes.

**Palabras clave:** emociones, historia de las emociones, metodología.

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## Alternativas na história das emoções

**Resumo. Objetivo/Contexto:** este texto apresenta alguns dos principais desafios que a história das emoções enfrenta na atualidade à luz das contribuições que o campo de estudo tem produzido a partir de sua criação. **Metodologia:** à medida que o campo da história das emoções continue se expandindo, é importante ter presente que as contribuições serão diferentes se as pessoas que trabalham sob essa ótica se focam, por exemplo, no indivíduo ou no contexto social, nos acontecimentos ou nos processos, em emoções específicas ou em sua articulação com processos históricos, em públicos pontuais ou em mais amplos, em contextos geográficos singulares ou em reflexões comparativas sobre diferentes âmbitos. **Originalidade:** este texto apresenta um balanço sobre os principais desafios metodológicos, temáticos e teóricos que os acadêmicos que trabalham com a perspectiva da história das emoções enfrentam, em um momento em que o campo atinge um alto nível de sofisticação. Além disso, propõe, de forma sintética, estratégias de trabalho direcionadas a fortalecer as contribuições que são feitas a partir desse campo de estudo. **Conclusões:** esta reflexão conclui que a história das emoções pode avançar em diferentes sentidos e que as várias alternativas analíticas à disposição dos historiadores da área têm o potencial de repercutir em diversos públicos, dentro e fora do âmbito das emoções, e de consolidar a contribuição que é feita do campo para o conhecimento em geral. Uma das principais questões enfatizadas é a urgente necessidade de estudar emoções em áreas geográficas além dos Estados Unidos, da Europa e da Austrália, entre as quais a América Latina se destaca como uma das mais importantes.

**Palavras-chave:** emoções, história das emoções, metodologia.



It has been about eighty years since one of the leaders of the *Annales* school called for the history of emotions, and roughly thirty years since serious, explicit work began in the field. Arguably, the achievements, in what is still a rather new specialty, have been considerable. Major centers and associations have emerged in several countries, with scholars fanned out even more widely. Patterns of change and continuity in many of the leading emotions have been explored, even in the so-called “basic” emotions that might seem most impervious to change. Connections between emotion and technological development have gained notice. Military history rewards attention to emotional change, as a recent work on the rise and fall of classic nostalgia has demonstrated. The role of emotion in key protest episodes, including the French and American revolutions, has been clearly established, significantly enhancing our understanding of political change. The fundamental premises of the field —that emotions are an important component of social behaviors and institutions *and* that past emotions differ from their counterparts in the present— have been amply demonstrated, providing a host of opportunities for innovative research.

There is of course much more to do. While many emotions have been covered, there are important gaps. The history of joy, for example, has been evoked but not really explored; a pioneering work on disgust has not been amplified, either geographically or chronologically. While often mentioned, the role of emotion in the history of nationalism or even the rise of modern sports invites further work. And geography remains a huge problem, though it is beginning to be addressed: we simply have much more information on patterns in Europe, Australia and the United States than on other key regions, and this not only limits our knowledge base but complicates larger claims.

We have also reached a level of sophistication in the field that has clarified some of the basic choices researchers face. Some of these are fairly standard in historical work, but others attach

distinctively to scholarship on emotion. Laying out some of the tensions —most of them offering a number of valid options— may add some clarity to the work of emotions historians going forward.

» 1 «

Here's a fundamental area, that emerged quite quickly when historical work on emotion began, and one with several ramifications: is our focus on the emotional *standards* of a society or group, or on "actual" emotional experience itself – the emotions people really feel? The two topics are closely related. Sociologists and social psychologists, and now historians as well, have demonstrated that the relevant "feeling rules" affect what people experience and how they express their emotions to themselves and others. The rise of romantic love, for example, did change the nature of love in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is also true that feeling rules are important in and of themselves; they help shape formulations in law, for example. But the topics are not identical, and it is important to keep the difference in mind.

Choice of focus obviously impacts selection of sources, including the familiar tension between reliance on intellectual history and a commitment to wider popular culture. Materials on social standards are much easier to come by than indications of actual experience. Happily, increasing use of ego documents and other artifacts is expanding opportunities. There is no single best choice: exploring emotional standards is revealing in its own right. But we can be increasingly explicit about what aspect of emotions history really concerns us.

And the tension between standards and experience spills over, finally, into one other crucial issue: the relationship between emotions history and class structure. "Feeling rules" are put forth most clearly by hegemonic groups. They may genuinely affect the emotional experience of other classes; they will certainly shape opportunities for expression, for example in courts of law. But the need for work explicitly on other sectors —the working class, immigrant communities, ultimately even rural society— is obvious, and happily is beginning to win some attention.

» 2 «

Every historian, particularly when working in a fairly new field, faces a choice between focus on a particular moment in the past —a snapshot— and an interest in exploring the process of change over time. Both approaches can yield useful knowledge; both deal with the challenging task of figuring out how past emotions differ, at least in part, from present ones. But obviously the scope is different; and treatment of causation is different —arguably more important in dealing with change. The relevance of findings to fields beyond history itself is likely to vary as well. The two approaches can ultimately coalesce, when the grasp of a single point in time sets up the possibility of dealing with the shift from that particular configuration to another: but the distinction is worth keeping in mind, particularly as the field matures.

» 3 «

Here's another tension, related to the previous one but a bit more subtle, emerging particularly as the range of subtopics in the history of emotions expands. Is the primary focus on the role of emotion in some past event —for example, a protest movement or a particular artistic style— or

on emotion itself? Either path can be fruitful, and of course the two can combine. But the tension is worth noting at least for this reason: primary attention to the role of emotion in other developments may not encourage consideration of the ways past emotions themselves differ from contemporary counterparts. Exploration of anger in a protest, for instances, will add depth to our understanding of the outburst, but it may implicitly suggest that anger itself does not fundamentally change, that only levels and opportunities shift over time. This may be true, but it involves a different set of assumptions from those that inform work primarily directed to emotions like anger, fear, or happiness themselves.

» 4 «

Historians of emotion face another set of decisions, about what kind of audience they are addressing; the issues here have tended to fade from view as the field itself expands, but they are really worth attention.

Many historians understandably hope for a wide and diverse audience, possibly even winning some notice from that elusive beast, the general reading public. In practice, of course, most write for specialists, and historians of emotion are no exception. In this particular field, however, the question of what kinds of specialist is important to keep in mind. Most historians, after all, primarily write for other historians, and often only a subset even of these. And when the main interest centers on a single period in the past, or the role of emotion in a particular historical episode, the temptation mounts. We write for other early modernists, or for other people interested in 19<sup>th</sup>-century labor protest, or perhaps mainly for other historians of emotion themselves.

And there is nothing wrong with this, to a point. But in our field, it is really worth keeping another potential audience in mind, at least to some extent: those practitioners in other disciplines who are interested in emotion and who may truly benefit from work that calls their attention to the historical dimension of emotional experience. (Just as, by the way, it benefits us as emotions historians to keep some tabs on relevant work in psychology or sociology or even, as some practitioners have discovered, neuroscience.) There is no clear right or wrong here —informing other historians is a good thing— but the issue of wider interaction must not be forgotten. This can include an interest in discussing fairly recent episodes in emotions history or even patterns of change that bring us into the present, where an interdisciplinary audience is particularly relevant.

» 5 «

Finally, there is the question of regional versus comparative approaches —again a common issue in history but one with urgent applicability to the history of emotion. The geographical challenge in our field has already been noted, and it alone warrants attention: the need for more work on Latin America, or Africa, or the Middle East is truly pressing. This must involve an abundance of varied work that is regional, or subregional, alone.

In the long run, however, we must also hope for some comparative ambition that will use regional findings to address larger questions about comparability over time. Do common trends in the modern physical history of death —the widespread decline of child mortality for example—generate roughly similar patterns of emotional death avoidance in all modern cultures? How do different cultural emphases on shame affect the experience of education in the 19<sup>th</sup> and

20<sup>th</sup> centuries? Hopefully, the maturation of regional and comparative work will allow historians to tackle questions of this sort in the future, with implications well beyond our own discipline.



There is no one way to do emotions history. Many flowers have blossomed, and more will do so in future. It is possible, however, that greater awareness of some of the choices we make going forward will improve our ability to communicate with other practitioners in the field and advance the field's contribution to knowledge. It is a privilege to help welcome the new work from Latin America represented in the following essays of *Historia Crítica*, as another sign of how the history of emotion is reaching into new domains.



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