



Revista de Estudios Sociales

ISSN: 0123-885X

Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad de los Andes

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The History of Emotions: Past, Present, Future\*

Revista de Estudios Sociales, no. 62, 2017, October-December, pp. 10-15

Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad de los Andes

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7440/res62.2017.02>

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# The History of Emotions: Past, Present, Future\*

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Received date: May 30, 2017 · Acceptance date: June 10, 2017 · Modification date: June 26, 2017

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.7440/res62.2017.02>

**Como citar:** Boddice, Rob. 2017. "The History of Emotions: Past, Present, Future". *Revista de Estudios Sociales* 62: 10-15. <https://dx.doi.org/10.7440/res62.2017.02>

**ABSTRACT** | This article briefly appraises the state of the art in the history of emotions, looking to its theoretical and methodological underpinnings and some of the notable scholarship in the contemporary field. The predominant focus, however, lies on the future direction of the history of emotions, based on a convergence of the humanities and neurosciences, and according to important observations about the biocultural status of human beings. While the article stops short of exhorting historians to become competent neuroscientists themselves, it does demand that historians of emotions take note of the implications of social neuroscientific research in particular, with a view to capturing the potential of the emotions to unlock the history of experience, and with a mind to unlocking the political importance of work in this area, namely, the shifting ground of what it means —how it feels— to be human.

**KEYWORDS** | *Author:* history of emotions; neuroscience; neurohistory; bioculture; experience

## Historia de las emociones: pasado, presente y futuro

**RESUMEN** | Este artículo evalúa el estado del arte en la historia de las emociones, considerando tanto sus fundamentos teóricos como metodológicos y algunos de los estudios contemporáneos más notables en este campo. Sin embargo, el enfoque predominante reside en la dirección que tomará la historia de las emociones en el futuro, con base en la convergencia de las humanidades y las neurociencias, y de acuerdo con importantes observaciones acerca del estatus biocultural de los seres humanos. Aunque este artículo no llega a exhortar a los historiadores a convertirse en neurocientíficos competentes, sí exige que los historiadores de la emociones tomen nota de las implicaciones de la investigación neurocientífica social en particular, con miras a captar el potencial de las emociones para decifrar la historia de la experiencia, y con el propósito de entender la importancia política del trabajo en esta área, a saber, el terreno cambiante de lo que significa —de lo que *se siente*— ser humano.

**PALABRAS CLAVE** | *Thesaurus:* experiencia. *Autor:* historia de las emociones; neurociencia; neurohistoria; biocultura

## A história das emoções: passado, presente e futuro

**RESUMO** | Este artigo avalia o estado da arte na história das emoções considerando tanto seus fundamentos teóricos quanto metodológicos, e alguns dos estudos contemporâneos mais notáveis nesse campo. Entretanto, o enfoque predominante reside na direção que tomará a história das emoções no futuro, com base na convergência das humanidades e das neurociências, e de acordo com as observações sobre o estado biocultural dos seres humanos. Este artigo não pretende convencer os historiadores a converter-se em neurocientistas, mas pede que os historiadores das emoções atentem para as implicações da pesquisa neurocientífica, a social em especial, com o objetivo de captar o potencial das emoções para decifrar a história da experiência, e com o propósito de entender a importância política do trabalho nessa área, especialmente o terreno cambiante do que significa —do que *se sente*— ser humano.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE** | *Thesaurus:* experiencia. *Autor:* biocultura; história das emoções; neurociência; neuro-história

\* This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 742470.

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## Universal Temptation

At the heart of the history of emotions project is the claim that emotions have a history. They are not merely the irrational gloss on an otherwise long narrative of history unfolding according to rational thought and rational decision-making. Nor are emotions merely the effect of history; they also have a significant place, bundled with reason and sensation, in the making of history. These two central claims require both a sophisticated understanding of what emotional experience is (or could be) and an openness to new understandings of historical causality and change. On the face of it, there is nothing particularly new about these claims. They were iterated in more or less this form by Lucien Febvre ([1938] 1992; 1941), who envisaged a history of emotions taking a central place in the *Annales* project. Others, less well known, came before Febvre (Bain 1859, 14–15, 28, 220–221; 1894, 619–622; Lewes 1879, 153–154). Nothing much was made of these ideas until Peter and Carol Stearns took up the baton in the mid-1980s (Stearns and Stearns 1985; 1986), but for more than a decade after that, few historians joined the throng. An uncomfortable debate lay at the centre of work on the emotions: essentially, were emotions to be found in nature, or were they nurtured in culture? It was a debate that few historians felt comfortable about challenging. It has either dominated interdisciplinary discussion about the emotions, or else it has lurked in the background, threatening to undermine anybody who went one way or another. But the debate has moved on for many; for some it has died. Historians now play a major role in emotions research, and some are reaching out to the emotion sciences in a convergent, sympathetic way. Essential to the success of this convergence is a resistance to the assumption that we already know what emotions are.

The temptation toward the universality of emotional phenomena is embedded in the sources with which we work. We are easily duped by continuities in language and by loose translations into thinking that love is love, fear is fear, anger is anger, and so on, and that we only need to take note of the changing contexts of expression with regard to these human biological universals. I am not the first to note that the archives are filled with hazardous materials! (Dixon 2012; Frevert *et al.* 2014; Wassmann 2016; Wierzbicka 1999). Yet the broader semantic context of individual emotion words can be unfolded to reveal a degree of nuance and unfamiliarity, if only we set out to look for it. Moreover, the temptation to translate historical “emotion” terms, be they in Greek, Latin or any other language, either living or dead, is fraught with the danger of elision, anachronism and simplification. We should, as per the exhortation of Ute Frevert and C. Stephen Jaeger, entertain the notion that some emotions have been “lost.”<sup>1</sup>

1 The coinage is Jaeger’s, but Frevert, who does not seem to have read him, has made the tag her own. See Frevert (2011); Jaeger (1999, 5).

Those who study emotions in the classical world are under no illusions that they are dealing not only with different “emotion” words, but with entirely different affective experiences. Hence any translation of *cholos* as “anger,” or of *elpis* as “hope,” or of *eleos* as “pity,” comes with a long digression on dissimilarity and serial warnings of the dangers of thinking that we know what we mean by these labels (Cairns 2016; Konstan 2001; 2006). Anthropologists have provided similar warnings for years (Plamper 2015, 75–146; Reddy 1997). We should heed them.

Such caution has been integral to the best work in the history of emotions since the mid-1980s. That work has gathered significant pace since the turn of the century,<sup>2</sup> bringing us to the current abundance of new material. One of the distinguishing marks of much recent scholarship, however, is that it does not take sufficient notice of the important theoretical and methodological work that has come before it.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, I fear that the history of emotions is being done precisely because it is the *done thing*, and this raises a red flag concerning the value of the tidal wave of spilt ink. There is a serious and important purpose to the history of emotions, but there is a risk that this gets lost in the pursuit of an intellectual fad. In this brief appraisal, I want to re-express what that serious and important purpose is, and to point out what the history of emotions is *not*. Central to this negative construction is my firm conviction that the history of emotions cannot simply be comprised of histories about emotions, while neglecting to historicise the object of their inquiry. The history of emotions must reject, in line with much of the latest research in the social neurosciences, any semblance of psychologism that would essentialize what emotions are. We cannot preconceive what emotions are and then simply write *about* them.

This in turn leads to a second cautionary note, concerning the end of the history of emotions (in terms both of its *telos* and of its termination). History remains focused, fundamentally, on understanding the human past, of which the emotions have been an important diachronic component both at the individual and relational level. The aim of historians is not to understand emotions *per se*, however, but rather how they were experienced, what aroused them, in what form, and with what effects. Emotions are, therefore, an epiphenomenon of historical experience more generally, and it is to that broader project that the history of

2 Reddy (2001) has been the catalyst for much of this work, combined with a renewed interest in Norbert Elias’s theory of emotional development over the *longue durée* and historians’ reactions against it. See Elias ([1939] 1994); Rosenwein (2002).

3 I resist naming names here. Suffice it to say that there is pressure to produce a great number of works that stake a claim to topical relevance. Many recent works claim to be about emotions or a single emotion, but do not really ask what this means, or what assumptions are carried into the study.

emotions ultimately contributes (Boddice forthcoming 2018b; Moscoso 2012; Moscoso and Zaragoza 2014).

### **“Emotion”: A Slippery Category**

Cautionary quotation marks appear around the word “emotion” itself as testament to the slipperiness of the object of our inquiries at a categorical level.<sup>4</sup> The scientification of “emotions,” as opposed to passions, sentiments, feelings, affections, and so on, in the nineteenth century, *did something* to emotions themselves (Dixon 2006). The attempt to quantify, measure and materialise emotions, in the viscera and in the mind, changed scientific understandings of what emotions were and how they worked, and in turn this re-wrote the cultural scripts for what constituted behaviour and communication recognised as “emotional” (Boddice 2016; Dror 1999). One could demonstrate similar shifts along these lines with regard to other major changes in knowledge about the affective realm, from Aristotle to the Stoics, to Descartes, to Darwin.<sup>5</sup> In short, “emotions” are practised according to a dynamic relationship within an epistemology of what emotions are, a delimited framework of available expressions (both verbal and gestural), the parameters of which are inherently political, and the biological materiality of the historical body.<sup>6</sup> Emotions are part of the biocultural story of being human.

For the history of emotions to work, the nature node of the nature/culture dyad has to be smashed. To say that emotions change over time is incompatible with claims that there is something fundamentally transcendent or “basic” about (some) emotions. The history of emotions implicitly challenges basic-emotions models and the principal tenets of affect theory, and it is my contention that it should explicitly do so (Ekman and Friesen 1976; Tomkins and McCarter 1964). The risks of not doing

this, it seems to me, are obvious. If we presuppose that we know what love is, or what fear is, according to a certain strain of transcendental psychologism or by reference to a particular brand of neurobiology, then we undermine our project with anachronism from the very beginning. The recent and profoundly important turn to the social among neuroscientists is empirically confirming, as historians have expected, that when the context of emotional expression changes, so too does the quality of the emotion itself. In turn, however, this brings about the downfall of the culture node of the nature/culture dyad as well because, for better or for worse, emotional experience is embodied in physical matter, thinking stuff, and visceral movement. We are left, happily, not with a binary model, but an integrated, biocultural whole.

### **Bioculture and the Neuro Turn**

The biocultural turn conceptualises human culture, in all its infinite varieties and materialities, as part of the natural and exaptive evolution of the species in its environment. It has become meaningless to talk of affects that are, as it were, “natural,” and of “emotions” as phenomena limited to that which is consciously self-managed. There is no reason to think that phenomena that appear “as if” automatic, to borrow Sara Ahmed’s formulation, take place outside of a cultural framework (Ahmed 2004, 27). Even if it were possible to conceive of such automaticity in the human body outside of a cultural context, it would be impossible to find such a human body. This observation throws open the scope of the history of emotions and points it in the direction of experience more broadly conceived. We cannot simply analyse conventions of expression in historical context and avoid the conclusion that, in documenting the historicity of gesture and utterance, we are also historicizing the experience of gesturing and uttering. We cannot simply analyse those emotional experiences—however dynamically they involve body and context—that we are conscious of, without also acknowledging that such emotive processes are running in the background. Our bioculturality does not afford us a “natural” realm to which to refer automatic processes.

If, along with the history of the senses and the history of ideas, the history of emotions’ chief contribution lies in its capacity to reveal the historicity of human experience, then it must look, as it develops, to insights from the neurosciences and to significant crossovers with neuro-historical approaches to history (Bourke 2016, 126; Burman 2012; McGrath 2016; Smail 2008). This is where it can achieve real traction as an historical methodology. After all, the history of love, or of anger, or of jealousy, is, in the end, about what it felt like to be in love, to be angry, or to be jealous, at one point or another in time. If we can allow that “what it felt like” changes over time and place, then we have the key to understanding what

4 I have been critical of a lack of theoretical sophistication among historians of emotion in this respect. Some historians of emotion have been casual about eliding the difference between passions, emotions, affects and so on, claiming that all such labels fall under the heading of what we mean when we think of emotional experience. I think this distorts the historical record on the one hand and flattens out contemporary semantics on the other. It also privileges a certain category of “we,” which presupposes that “our” understanding of emotional experience is the archetype to which to refer. See in particular Rosenwein (2016, 7–8, 17); Eustace (2008, 3, 76–77); Plamper (2015, 10–12, 38, 296, 299); Boddice (forthcoming 2018a).

5 For the experiential implications of emotional rhetoric, over the *longue durée* and against biologizing trends, see Gross (2006).

6 On emotions as a kind of practice, see Scheer (2012). On the political distribution, limitation and policing of emotions, see Gross (2006). For emotions and the history of the body, the best starting point is Smail (2008). The dynamic relation between feelings and codes of expression for feelings has been best explored by Reddy (1997).

it means—how it *feels*—to be human is culturally and contextually contingent. And in this we find the political significance of our project. The social neurosciences are empirically demonstrating the mutability of experience and the contextual subjectivity of perceptions of reality. Even some of the most basic experiential phenomena, such as pain, have been shown to be at once both highly individuated and closely correlated with cultural pain scripts (Boddice 2017; MacDonald and Jensen-Campbell 2011). With pain, as with other emotions, there is no simple neurological and functional relation among stimulus, bodily process, and experience.

This has been one of the major contributions of work in neurohistory in the last ten years, which has pointed to a world of psychotropic influences on the body-mind, many of which have their effect without any conscious consumption or direct human agency (Bourke 2016, 126; Burman 2012; McGrath 2016; Smail 2008). While it is easy to point to the psychotropic effect of new drugs (caffeine, alcohol, opioids, etc.) when they are introduced into a society, as well as to the (literally) mind-altering effects of new technologies (print, TV, Internet, etc.), there is a whole ecology of chemical stimulants that is contextually specific and which forms the background to the range and quality of human affect. Whether it be specific atmospheric pollutants that have an effect on human behaviour (lead, for example), or the presence of other substances in specific technological processes (exposure to mercury in various industries, both past and present, for example, has clearly documented effects on the mental and physical disposition of the exposed), or the rise and spread of new diseases (syphilis is a prime candidate here), humanity is always being exposed to stimuli that—to some degree— influence “automatic” affective processes in historically specific and concrete ways. Daniel Lord Smail has argued that, in its focus on conscious processes and outward signs, the history of emotions is experientially limited and selective in its use of the historical body as explanatory tool. While human exposure to lead at high levels in the post-war United States (his example) cannot be used to explain any specific instance of violent crime in a given context, he argues that the connection between lead contamination and uncontrolled anger is demonstrable, and that such a stimulus has to be included as a probable contributory cause in what has otherwise been a socio-economic story of late twentieth-century American violence (personal correspondence with the author; Boddice and Smail forthcoming 2018). Moreover, and this is where historians of emotion must take note, it is a cause that historians of emotions would, until quite recently, have missed.

While some will resist a turn toward neuroscience in the discipline of history, it seems implausible for the history of emotions to avoid moving in this direction, if it is to claim any relevance or significance beyond the confines of its own practitioners. The pathfinding

work of Lisa Feldman Barrett in particular has unpicked many of the prevailing psychologizing tendencies, pointing to the remarkable plasticity of the human brain and the worldedness of synaptic development, as well as to the activation of the whole brain in all emotional experiences (Feldman Barrett 2006a; 2006b; Gendron and Feldman Barrett 2009). The temptation to link certain emotional expressions to certain “built-in” affects has been shown to be misguided and misleading. Experience is not intrinsic to some kind of biological wiring, though of course embodiment places certain limits on what can be possible. Nevertheless, to an important degree synaptic development and changes in body chemistry take place in context. If we were to preserve the old binary relation, we might say that culture writes to nature, but it makes much more sense simply to claim the human as dynamically biocultural.

## Future Prospects

The implications are profound. Human experience is, to borrow a phrase from the pain specialist Ronald Melzack, an *output* of the brain (Melzack 2005). Humans are not mere sacks of DNA, passively encountering the world around them and experiencing what is objectively and materially out there. Everything we experience is filtered through context, custom, cultural scripts and taboos, before being checked against what we know from the past (in our own lives and through what we know about more distant pasts) and projected outwards from the brain, as if automatically, as our construction—our interpretation—of what is happening and what that feels like. The entanglement of culture and biology shifts the register of possibilities for the history of emotions because it forces us to look at what is non-conscious as well as what is conscious.<sup>7</sup> It displaces the wistful social constructionism of old and grounds it in an empirically verifiable field of evolutionary biology. It gives us cause to explore the historicism of reality, not as a simple gloss on a biologically stable base, but as an authentically experienced and embodied diachronic process.

Some will object, no doubt, that we cannot subject past actors to neuroscientific analysis. My point of contention is that we do not need to. The insights from the social neurosciences offer historians an opportunity that they are ideally suited to carry out.<sup>8</sup> Knowledge of neuroplasticity, of the effect of culture on biological processes, and of the cultural framing of neurological activity, suggest that we can look to reconstruct the conditions of historical experience, not to get at the past

7 This limitation is an explicit formulation of William Reddy, but the theoretical work of Sara Ahmed, Daniel Lord Smail, Monique Scheer and others undermines it.

8 Reddy (2015) said as much, calling Feldman Barrett’s work in particular a “hunting license” for historians of emotion.

functioning of the brain, but to get at the past feeling of historical actors. This lies partially in historians' ability to piece together the cultural context of historical worlds, in their material, intellectual and social aspects, but it lies mainly in historians' attention to the testimony of historical actors.

I have suggested elsewhere that the principal change afforded by the neuro turn is that we are able to approach archival material with an eye to the literal rather than the metaphorical (Boddice and Smail forthcoming 2018). Since the cultural turn there has been an important shift towards taking the words of historical actors as meaningfully representative of the world in which they lived (Zemon Davis 1990), but underlying this there have been two opposed implications. Either the cultural construction of reality obliterates any reference to a reality beyond culture, or else the figural realism of historical actors is a simple gloss on an external reality that can be investigated separately.<sup>9</sup> The neuroscientific impetus allows us, instead, to take historical actors at their word, with their perception of reality and their experience of it being both an expression of their cultural context *and* a manifestation of the way in which that context was embodied. To be able to take our sources at their word, that they loved, feared, angered, hoped, despaired and suffered in this way, does not require any particular technological wizardry on the part of historians. It simply behooves us to find the parameters of those affective experiences in context. This involves knowing the meaning and expression of historical "emotions" and emotion words, the social dynamics of their expression, and the causes and effects, including at the environmental level, of changes in these things.<sup>10</sup> We do not come to know the historical brain, on a neurological basis, but we can come to know the history of experience.

In broad terms, these are the core arguments of my book, *The History of Emotions*, which is in press as I write this. As I was finishing my attempt to present the diverse range of approaches and the vast scale of periodical coverage of scholarship in the history of emotions to students and scholars, I realised that, publishing being what it is, my book would be bibliographically

behind the curve by the time it appeared. The history of emotions, as a field, has reached a size that makes appraising it as a whole daunting, if it is even possible. New scholarship is appearing at a rate that makes even just keeping up with the reading a difficult task. It is a sign of the rude health of the field, but it comes with some caveats, which I have outlined in broad terms here. If the future of the history of emotions is uncertain, dependent for its rationale, if not its methodology, on the ongoing development of the social neurosciences, its future possibilities are nonetheless exciting for that very reason.

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9 This was the defining theme of the post-modern turn. The phrase "figural realism," of course, belongs to Hayden White (1999).

10 There are some fantastic examples of this kind of work. Nicole Eustace, in particular, has carefully explored both the social dynamics of love and of anger in her wide-ranging work on pre-revolutionary America, *Passion is the Gale* (2008). Key to this is a sensitivity to the relation of social convention in private correspondence about, say, love, which at the same time informs the experience of love. She is equally alive to the shifting possibilities of public anger and the social dynamics that circumscribe both the experience and the expression of that emotion.

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