

## Is There a History of Emotion?

Marcy May

We laugh, we love, we grieve, we suffer. The emotional expressions shared by humans are part of the rich territory historians explore in their investigations of the past. Joy and sorrow often serve as pivotal points in our analyses, from the triumphal ending of wars to the sad passing of national leaders. As historians, we know that the emotions of the people and populations we are writing about often act as the true center of our storytelling and analysis, the thing that sparks a deeper connection with the past.

An examination of the history of emotion itself is far less common, however. Until recently, few historians have directly addressed how the expression of emotions such as love or anger may change over time. Much of what we have identified about historically variable expressions of emotion comes from work that has been done on gender and sexuality, violence, or mourning. We know about how nineteenth century white Americans perceived the ideal love between spouses, for example, through exploration of women's roles and sexuality. Historians who have considered childhood may offer us insight into rebellious sons in Regency England or twentieth-century America with nuanced portraits of the limits and boundaries of anger and disobedience.

From the 1980s onward, a number of historians have begun a more explicit investigation of emotion. American historians Peter S. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns argued for a new field focused on "emotionology" in the *American Historical Review*, pointing out that anthropologists and other scholars were already comfortable with studying feelings. Despite the Stearns' eagerness and a series of books on anxiety, fear, and "cool" which followed, most historians placed their work on emotion into a larger context. Karen Haltunnen, for instance, considered the changing perceptions of pain and fear within a study of nineteenth century Gothic imagination. In her prize-winning *This Republic of Suffering*, Drew Gilpin Faust considered the importance of grief through the crisis of massive casualties in the Civil War.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, "Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 90, No. 4 (Oct., 1985), pp. 813-836; Karen Haltunnen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination*. (Cambridge: Harvard U. P. 1998); Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*. (New York: Vintage, 2009).

More recently, the reluctance some historians expressed about the legitimacy of an explicit investigation of emotion has given way to encouragement. Historian Jan Plamper wrote in *History and Theory* about the study of emotional history as a “burgeoning field”, while the *American Historical Review* editors highlighted this “new historical territory.” A Center for the History of the Emotions at the University of London, and a History of Emotions Research Center at the Max Planck Institute in Berlin, along with the Australian Research Council Center on the History of Emotions, illustrate the growing global attention to this scholarship.

Disagreement over how to conceptualize the historical study of emotion enriches the field. Duke University anthropologist William M. Reddy explores the connections between language and emotion in his 2001 *The Navigation of Feeling*, linking language and the expression of emotion in evolving community norms and rituals. Medieval historian Barbara Rosenwein challenges the work of Norbert Elias, whose 1939 *The Civilizing Process* presented a simple evolution in emotion from the “wild, cruel, . . . violent” people of the Middle Ages to the restraint, moderation and self-control of the modern era. Rosenwein rejects what she terms a “grand narrative” for the concept of “emotional communities.” Historians should look at social communities, she argues, to undercover “systems of feeling: what these communities define and assess as valuable or harmful,” the perception of emotions among others, and the ways in which emotional bonds are expressed, reinforced, or ritualized. As American historian Nicole Eustace notes, examining the history of emotion allows us to consider how emotion serves as a means of social communication, the role that emotion plays in constructing political or social power, and how individuals consider a notion of “the self” in society.<sup>2</sup>

All of this work gives us new ways to think about how people experience their worlds, what forces shape or constrain their responses, and how they assign meaning to what they feel and what they know. In this issue of *Clio*, the editors have selected a variety of articles which shed light on emotional experiences, from the fear generated by propaganda to the sympathy constructed in Civil War era poetry.

---

<sup>2</sup> “AHR Conversation: The Historical Study of Emotion,” *American Historical Review* 117 (2012): 1487-1530; Nicole Eustace, *Passion is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Jan Plamper, “The History of Emotions: An Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein, and Peter Stearns,” *History and Theory* 49 (2010): 237-265; Barbara Rosenwein, “Worrying about Emotions in History,” *American Historical Review* 107 (2002): 821-845; William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework of the History of Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).