correspondents at large

Historicizing Emotions in Berlin

UTE FREVERT

[I]

IN THE LAST FEW YEARS THERE HAS BEEN A TREMENDOUS SURGE IN RESEARCH PROJECTS FOCUSING ON THE HISTORY OF EMOTIONS. HISTORIans all over the world, from Australia to London, from Princeton to Madrid, from Canada to Paris, have started to examine emotions from a historical perspective. Among the many individual and collective projects, the Berlin Center for the History of Emotions holds a special place. Since its founding in 2008, a group of twenty to thirty historians have devoted their research efforts to the single but complex goal of historicizing emotions. As an integral part of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, the center is sufficiently funded to carry out such basic research and will continue to do so for years. It offers superb working conditions, providing offices and excellent library resources to its pre- and postdoctoral fellows and organizing weekly seminars and a great number of international conferences with the participation of distinguished scholars. Furthermore, the center welcomes visiting researchers (who mostly bring their own funding) and invites them to actively participate in and contribute to ongoing debates and events. Together with three major Berlin universities (Free University, Humboldt University, Technical University), the center launched an International Max Planck Research School for graduate training. Every year, six graduate students are accepted to the program, which focuses on moral economies of modern societies, with an emphasis on moral emotions.

Research at the Berlin Center concentrates on the modern period (seventeenth to twentieth centuries), which Max Weber and Norbert Elias famously described as an age of increasing rationalization. Deeply skeptical about allegedly linear processes in history, the center sets out to investigate the manner in which emotions have been conceptualized and practiced during these four hundred years. Most of our work is on Europe and its former colonies in North America and South Asia. Investigating those colonial encounters allows us to write transnational history as entangled history involving

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the mediation between and translation of different emotional languages and styles.

[II]

These languages and styles can roughly be described as practical rules of feeling that exist in any society and that deeply influence what and how people feel. They form an integral part of institutional arrangements and environments that affect people's mental and emotional maps. Rules of feeling are taught, learned, negotiated, and practiced in the family, in personal friendships, at school, in peer groups, in the army, in the workplace, in politics, and so on. They can be acquired by reading poems and novels, by listening to music and attending concerts, by watching a drama on stage, or by going to the cinema. They are revealed in advice manuals, which have seen an extraordinary proliferation during the modern period.

Not to be confused with unequivocally and authoritatively stated norms, prescriptions, and demands, rules and practices of feeling are constantly revisited, interpreted, and contested. In a given society, they may differ according to gender, age, social class, ethnic background, religion, and sexual orientation. What is perceived as hegemonic is open to debate, criticism, and change. Faced with numerous and possibly contradictory rules and practices of feeling in different institutions, people negotiate how best to navigate among them and assess their importance for their own lives and personal development. As members of social groups and institutions, they are not passive recipients but active participants in creating, upholding, or dismantling these rules and practices through day-to-day social interaction.

To stress the social foundations of these rules and practices means to shed light on their historicity. Change largely occurs through institutional reconfigurations. Once an institution loses its power, its rules and practices of feeling become less defined and less binding on society at large. When families turn into intimate emotional spaces nurturing feelings of mutual trust, empathy, and love, as happened during the nineteenth century, the shift affects other institutions, such as school and friendship. The emphasis on sensibility in bourgeois cultures in Europe around 1800 and 1900 affected scientific research on emotions in those periods. Scientific approaches to emotion and the regulation of emotion were in high demand by industrial companies trying to enhance workers' performance in the twentieth century. "Emotional intelligence," a concept hyped since the 1990s, has its roots in the "psychophysics" of work developed a hundred years earlier.

Exploring those interconnected historical processes allows us to link rules and practices of feeling to the dynamic structure of modern and modernizing societies. But what does it tell us about feelings as such? If emotions have a physiological and neural basis, should we conclude that this basis is fixed, that shame, happiness, grief, and so on will feel the same regardless of time, space, and culture?

We historians agree with our colleagues in the natural and life sciences that emotions are felt and embodied physically, but we consider the body a historical artifact rather than something objectively and independently given. How the body is perceived and conceptualized clearly determines how bodily sensations are experienced. The body has long been believed to interact with mental processes and the sociocultural environment. For centuries, experts and performers in dance and the theater have focused on how people can create sensations in the body by using emotional words, mimicry, and gestures. Recent studies in epigenetics and neuroscience provide further proof of the body's and brain's plasticity. They even suggest and support the idea that biochemical and neural structures might undergo permanent changes because of environmental pressures and incentives. New rules of feeling, therefore, as practiced in social interactions in the workplace, religious congregations, political gatherings, and else-

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where, are bound to influence what a person experiences as private feeling.

[III]

Historicizing emotions requires a complex approach: they should not be essentialized, and their phenomenology should not be determined once and for all. At the Berlin Center for the History of Emotions, we therefore did not work on particular emotions but identified three major research areas in which individual and collective projects could be grouped: education and the cultivation of emotions, emotions and the body, and emotions and power.

In the area of education and the cultivation of emotions, research focuses on historical attempts to shape emotions in and through various institutional settings and media—among them, advice literature, medical films, character-building practices in the classroom, collective singing in schools and youth clubs, and initiatives to "civilize" the emotions of native peoples in colonial encounters. These institutions and media became increasingly important and comprehensive during the modern period. Schools and schooling grew more inclusive and dominant, as religious institutions were before them, while the latter gradually lost their importance as emotional learning environments, at least in Western societies. Our research examines how people were driven to have, show, or suppress certain feelings; what happened when people realized that their feelings did not fit regular social patterns; and how this disagreement challenged the dominant rules of feeling and emotional styles.

Projects in the area of emotions and the body concentrate on how emotions are embodied through practices such as anti-AIDS activism, loving animals, religious enactments, grieving, and confronting illness and death.

In the area of emotions and power, we regard power differentials as crucial. In modern societies, power is regularly framed by an emotional language that directly or indirectly relates to people's sense of honor and dignity. That sense can lead people to revolt against power in the economic and political spheres. Our projects analyze national and international policy and investigate how feelings are observed and controlled in human capital management and consumer society. Finally, we observe how law, an increasingly powerful instrument for shaping and regulating social practices and relations, utilizes emotional concepts. In penal law, violent emotions are perceived as spurring criminal acts: the so-called crimes of passion and crimes of honor. Law has always struggled to relate these emotions to free will, individual responsibility, and culpability. Legal debates thus offer insight into discourses on reason and rationality, on good and bad morals, on coolheadedness and hot temper, and on emotions deemed just or unjust, acceptable or despicable. Such discourses are not purely theoretical; they determine how justice is administered, how defendants frame their defense, and how the public sees cases.

It goes without saying that these three areas are not separate from one another: each area informs all our projects, albeit to varying degrees, allowing for cooperation and collaboration across the lines.

[IV]

Apart from working on individual projects that result in monographs, the center's researchers have been involved in collaborations. Along with the common practice of publishing conference papers in edited volumes, the center's infrastructure encourages a more ambitious form of cooperation: researchers share a research question by working on a common corpus of sources and writing a book together. Two such books were published recently.

The first, *Emotional Lexicons*, focuses on knowledge about emotion that was widely disseminated between 1700 and 2000. To

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understand how people felt, we have to understand what they knew and how they thought about feelings. To find out about time-specific attitudes and opinions, we consulted encyclopedias published between the eighteenth century and the end of the twentieth. Encyclopedias are sources of information and education addressed to a general, nonspecialist public. The fact that they have had numerous editions over those three hundred years enables us to trace trends and detect changes. Reading some ten thousand articles on core emotion terms such as *affect*, *feeling*, *sentiment*, *desire*, and *passion* made us realize how and why the vocabulary of feeling has shifted. The relevant scientific disciplines changed, from philosophy to medicine, physiology, and psychology. This transformation was accompanied by a somatization of feelings. On the one hand, somatization held the possibility of universalizing emotions. On the other hand, there was the tendency to add to the physical differences among human beings (and between human beings and animals) differences in gender, age, social class, and race. This correlation became moralized and politicized.

The second book, *Learning How to Feel*, considers a large number of children's books and advice manuals published in European countries, the United States, and India between the mid–nineteenth century and the 1970s. Our thesis is that these kinds of literature offered practical emotional knowledge by exposing readers to situations of behavioral conflict and emotional negotiation. Such situations changed considerably. First, the focus on emotional interactions between adults and children was succeeded by a focus on interactions among children, while gender categories became less important. Second, the abdication of hierarchical modes of emotional communication led to a pluralization of emotional models that required children to navigate complex landscapes instead of following a well-trodden path. Third, children were increasingly taught to take responsibility for their own emotional development and to find authenticity for themselves—thus subscribing to a process of individualization that we had also observed in our first joint project.

Another collaborative project, under way, considers emotional encounters with people and environments perceived as strange, foreign, or bewildering. It will examine to what extent and in which circumstances emotions have been used to build bridges between strangers or to create enmities. The project is connected with the graduate program on moral economies offered by the International Max Planck Research Schools, where doctoral students investigate the underlying moral principles and emotional styles of institutions, movements, and politics, with an emphasis on modes of exchange and negotiation.

Having established itself as a hub of research on the history of emotions, the center reaches out to an ever-increasing number of national and international colleagues who share this interest. There have been many visiting scholars, whose presence attests to the subject's intellectual appeal. Through joint conferences and seminars, we foster ties of cooperation that strengthen the new field and inspire those who intend to expand its boundaries, theoretically and empirically.

Note

For further information, please visit www.mpib-berlin.mpg.de/en/research/history-of-emotions. On the International Max Planck Research School for Moral Economies of Modern Societies, see www.mpib-berlin.mpg.de/en/research/research-schools/imprs-moral-economies. Our Internet portal is at www.history-of-emotions.mpg.de/en.

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