

## *What is the History of Emotions?*

Barbara H. Rosenwein and Riccardo Cristiani

Cambridge Polity Press 2018

[ISBN-13 978-1-5095-0850-1 paperback]

[ISBN-13 978-1-50-95-0849-5 hardback]

FRANCESCO BUSCEMI

Max-Planck Institut für Bildungsforschung

Despite its recent success, the history of emotions is still finding itself according to Barbara H. Rosenwein and Riccardo Cristiani, who are trying with this book to provide scholars with bearings or at least a map. That's why the book is conceived to give an overview for those interested in the research on emotions: from the modern insights coming from psychological sciences to the presentation of the main "schools" of historical thought dealing with this topic, without being afraid to assess the trends in current studies and predictions about their future.

The reader shouldn't expect to deal with a simple compendium, though. The two authors propose that "unexpected coherencies and patterns" in the field exist, hence the structure of their book and their focus on the different approaches to the study of bodies in the third chapter. They stress the relevance of their discipline in our time: the history of emotions "studies the emotions that were felt and expressed in the past; it looks at what has changed and what ties together their past and present". Helping a wider audience to reach a certain consciousness on the way they deal with emotional states seems one of the hidden aims of this book and of the whole discipline. The authors notice in fact how emotions have become an obsession in the last twenty-five years or so and historians' research topics represent no exception. Despite this trend, the words used by historians are sometimes quite slippery and the debate about how to define emotions is far from being closed.

This is why the review of the different definitions of emotions, past and present, is one of the most useful sections of the book, something students and all people interested in the history of emotions will find helpful to understand what is at stake in the jargon that researchers from different disciplines use when dealing with passions, affects, affections, sentiments, feelings.

After briefly mentioning the insights coming from Huizinga, Febvre and Elias, one of the core chapters analyses the four foundational approaches to the history of emotions after 1980s, when it started to gain the status of a historiographical field. Rosenwein and Cristiani explain in an effective way the *emotionology* of Peter and Carol Zisowitz Stearns, the *emotional regimes* and *emotives* of William M. Reddy, the notion of *emotional communities* made popular by Barbara H. Rosenwein's own work, and the way Gerd Althoff treated emotions as performances.

From a didactic perspective, it is useful to see these different approaches applied to the text of the Declaration of Independence of the United States, as the authors do at the end of the second chapter. Following an *emotionology* perspective and its focus on basic emotions, the pursuit of happiness that the American colonists included among the inalienable rights would be in line with the «standards of happiness», that is with the major emphasis on cheerfulness that connoted the Enlightenment and modernity. Looking at *emotives* and emotional regimes, as Reddy would do, we might be tempted to consider happiness as the emotional refuge American colonists found to cope with the sorrow grief felt under the British rule. Historians of emotions working on *emotional communities* would insist on the collective biographies of the men who signed the Declaration: how obvious was the entanglement between happiness and independence both in personal and private for a Virginian man like Jefferson? Or is it better to look for the community built around the readership of Alexander Pope, who wrote consistently on happiness as the goal of man? Considering emotional display as a ritualized performance, instead, would bring us to seize the emotions in the Declaration as communicative modes – an approach Gerd Althoff and those who focused on the body would probably find more convincing.

Perhaps the most challenging part of the book is where Rosenwein and Cristiani try to give a sense of the different ways current historians make use of these four foundational approaches. Choosing to discuss how different understandings of the notion of “emotional body” shaped the discipline could provide a promising perspective for the reader. Nevertheless, their narrative sometimes veers into the territory of a review of works related to the topic. It is indeed instructive to assess how the history of emotions followed the pace of the long ride of historiography towards a new cultural history (gender, the study of social practices *à la* Bourdieu...). And it is even more important to convey the message that today’s historians of emotions use a variety of approaches and strategies according to their questions and personal interests: the general challenge of giving a history to men’s and women’s emotional states led them to uncharted territories for the whole discipline. If it is somehow inevitable that Rosenwein and Cristiani’s narrative sometimes is too fast and the chapter almost looks like a review article, their effort in finding the most common patterns and strategies is nonetheless what makes their book useful for all the historians seeking out collaborations or simply insights beyond their own historiographical niche. Following the narrative of Rosenwein and Cristiani, the reader will grasp the most popular trends of the discipline, be able to compare methods, and find common ground between the sometimes very different approaches adopted by those engaged in this field today. Among these is Monique Scheer’s notion of emotions as *practices of the body* that led many historians to investigate the perceiving sounds, smells, and spaces of emotions – a “multimedia” approach that marks the works of Margrit Pernau and many researchers of the Center for the History of Emotions of the Max Planck Institute in Berlin directed by Ute Frevert.

In addition, the authors cause the reader to explore the challenges of affect theory or the possibilities opened by the renewal of the study of material culture, that is the materiality of emotional practices and the way also “things become emotionally meaningful” (Sarah Tarlow, “Emotion in Archaeology,” *Current Anthropology* 41/5, 2000, 713-46: 729). By precisely picking up the reflections of archaeologists historians are starting to take more seriously the emotional meaning of objects. Making sense of this material is not always easy and those who tried often had to draw on the general cultural significance of these objects. This is somehow disturbing from the perspective of strict historical methodology. While it is hard to imagine a convincing historical understanding of the emotions carried by these objects without any help from written sources, it is indeed intriguing to conceive a historical work built on the idea that certain objects have their own emotional agency.

The last section is dedicated to the future of the discipline, but it is far from being a triumphant chant over its destiny. Rosenwein and Cristiani don't leave much space to wishful thinking and highlight the biggest challenges for the history of emotions. The first one comes from interdisciplinarity being so far one of the keys of this field. Historians have in fact traditionally played a major role in emotions research, as the variety of articles in journals like *Emotion Review* testify. The possibility of voicing again our insights in fields where the voice of historians is rarely taken into any consideration is indeed a good reason to engage with the methodology of the history of emotions. It is not easy path, though. As Peter Stearns wrote as recently as 2015, most of the historians of emotions today are less interested in interdisciplinarity than the generation of the pioneers in this field used to be: the most compelling challenge now seems being able to inform every historical inquiry. Those who work in the historical fabric of emotions want to be taken seriously by their colleagues in intellectual, political or social history. Winning that challenge would mean to accomplish a goal similar to the one accomplished by gender historians some decades ago. However, it is crucial to stress how some of the most important outcomes in the history of emotions came from the fruitful interactions with psychologists, philosophers and other scholars studying emotions – a favour that these scholars did not always reciprocate when dealing with topics where the history of emotions could be helpful if not essential.

There is yet another challenge waiting for historians who dare cross the walls of academia. As Rosenwein and Cristiani put it, «it is time to revolutionize the way we think of our emotional lives» (119). This is why the book encourages educators, politicians, religious leaders, parents, and media creators to engage with the history of emotions. If we now take for granted that feelings are so relevant in every aspect of our lives, it is then more important than ever to understand why and how. The history of emotions has the makings to help with that. Allowing students and professional historians to approach this field without fear, this book is another step toward achieving this goal.