

History and Emotions: On Social Constructions and the Politics of Fear

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In the collection of sources offered in this dossier, one of the first conclusions to come to light is how various representations of fear, from political and social points of view, are capable of influencing processes and dynamics of the most different of natures. History gives us several reasons for this, ranging from *metus gallicum* – as discussed in an essay by Tommaso Gnoli – or the way in which the power of fear was exercised by constituents of the aristocracy of the Roman Empire (Uwe Walter), or even deriving from the search for security when faced with threats which are either external or have been produced by one's surroundings. In all of the above cases, the political mobilisation of fear comes to light as a factor which is capable of directing collective action and has been evidenced in an incisive manner and is loaded with consequences in certain verses. If we were to simply limit ourselves to observations concerning the feeling of uncertainty which has been created recently in Europe in the wake of old problems resurfacing and newer challenges arising, the recourse of the metaphorical politics of fear – that is, the fear of losing economic power and cultural hegemony on a global scale or the fear of being overwhelmed by endless waves of migrants – is noticeable in the daily routines of every government in Europe [Salvati 2015].

An area of research which has been studied frequently in historiography over the course of the 20th Century and more notably very recently is the question of fear as a political and historical factor. Much has already been published since 1932 when Georges Lefebvre, in a reflection on the construction of a political space during the French Revolution, noted the presence of the first stage of revolutionary politicization which then became a reality during the presumed aristocratic conspiracy [Lefebvre 1932]. In 1978, almost fifty years after the publication of Lefebvre's work, Jean Delumeau published *La peur en Occident, XIVe – XVIIIe siècles. Une cité assiégée*. In this essay, the French historian focused his analysis on the social dynamics in which a "processing of fears" had taken shape (heretics, blasphemers, Satan, Jews, subversive people and so on) without failing to

offer an interpretation regarding the reasons for the radicalisation of fear in the collective consciousness of the working class and the élites who occupied positions of power, first among which being the clergy [Delumeau 1978]. Recently, Joanna Bourke has proposed an inventory of case studies about the perceptions and representations of fear in America and the United Kingdom from the Nineteenth to the Twentieth Century, and concluded by writing that fear is «a powerful driving force in the history of humanity» [Bourke 2005, XII].

Perhaps instead of going into the merits and the problems of Bourke's study, the reader could focus on an entirely different issue. Bourke, as many other theorists studying the cultural history of emotions, assigns fear a universal character. In the process of the formation of modernity, fear becomes a historical and political factor, a coagulation of different interests and expectations of social groups: during the structural transformations of modernity it acquires a variable infinity of cultural meanings and can become an instrument in the foundation and legitimisation of political power. In other words, in cultural history it is fear which is an elementary form of the organisation of modern societies, especially in public discourse where it could constitute an element of negotiation which had become necessary to determine the physiognomy of certain relationships of power[1]. However, in this way, the cultural history of fear risks going back to where it all began, as a fear considered as a metahistorical emotion.

How can then one study fear from a historical perspective which focuses more on political, social and cultural dimensions, if not through the psychological and anthropological introspections which tend to emphasise the pre-political dimension in which an emotion such as fear can be considered, in all respects, natural?

In recent years one can note a sort of *emotional turn*[2] in international historiography with the intention of returning emotions to the core of history. To this end, an essay by Ute Frevert is an emblematic example, in which the

German historian observed that the renewal of interest regarding emotions in the fields of historiography and social sciences occurred at the same time as the rejection of an analytical perspective which tended to reduce the status of feelings or passions to mere “primary affects” which resist change. On the other hand, as Frevert mentions, emotions are subjects of a dynamic nature, are capable of demonstrating ambivalences and constitute the interface between interests and influences for the individual. For this reason they mould modern subjectivity in the way that social interactions are also capable of doing [Frevert 2009].

A reflection on studies produced over the course of the past decade seems to suggest that, on one hand, there is a tendency to consider emotions as a dimension shapes social action, whilst on the other hand, the hypothesis of the historical authenticity of emotions has been accepted[3]. A clear indication to consolidate this point of view is the circulation of terminology on an international scale, ranging from “*emotional regime*” (William Reddy), “*emotional communities*” (Barbara Rosenwein) or even the concept of “*emotionology*” by Peter S. Stearns[4].

William Reddy proposed that emotions should be considered as the result of the interaction and the negotiation between individual experience and linguistic expressions (*emotives*) of a certain historical context, as sites in which a variable series of *emotional regimes* are constructed. By *emotional regimes*, one falls back on the definition that they are a «set of normative emotions and the official rituals, practices, and emotives that express and inculcate them, a necessary underpinning of any stable political regime» [Reddy 2001]. Similarly to this, essays by Matthias Müller and Torben Möbius, which can be found in this dossier and which focus on representations of the Soviet “enemy” in Federal Germany and on the instrumental use of fear in the Nazi regime, both offer particularly suggestive and stimulating case studies for reflection in greater detail.

Moving away from other interests the Mediaeval historian Barbara

Rosenwein drew academic attention to the way in which individual or group experiences have produced representations and have shared emotive norms, by focusing on the formation processes of emotive communities as social communities. According to the American historian, any type of social group tends to recognise itself in a similar system of emotions, which itself should be considered as the result of the self-representation of values derived from being part of the very same community, in the same way that such communities revolve around common sentiments and emotive modes of expression which can be preferred, tolerated or even refused. Rosenwein's argument is a question of reasoning, one which does not wish to be confined to a certain historical period, but which could even be applied to the modern political framework [Rosenwein 2002]. An example of this could be, to some extent, a study by Florian Schleking on the consumption of drugs in Federal Germany in the 1970s.

Despite the differences in theoretical references and the methodical references, the cultural history of emotions seems to have three key points in common. Firstly, the general premise that emotions should be considered as genuine social phenomenon. According to this historiographical field, emotions such as fear, trust, chastity, shame and confidence, to name but a few, are social constructions and which, therefore, historiographical studies should not dwell on the social space would normally have in modelling feelings, but rather on the relevance of feelings in the construction and constitution of social conventions. Secondly, one should consider the hypothesis that emotions should not be antithetic to rationality, but that there is an interaction between reason and feelings, and that feelings are thought to have a specific and rational connotation. Finally, one should consider the ascertainment that every historical enquiry should commence with the assumption of a "*historische Vergänglichkeit*" (Ute Frevert) as far as emotions are concerned: they have a contingency, and are fleeting and unstable[5]. This would mean not only that emotions change in the biography of the individual, but that they are also subject to continuous

transformations through time; in theory they can lose or gain meaning and cultural significance in relation to economic, political or social changes in a society.

In the course of modernity, fear seems to be figured as a politically productive feeling which is capable of feeding on the imagination of a threat of differing discursive configurations in the symbolic space of social solidarity, on the very issue of identity [Galli 2010]. It would suffice to reread *Der Streit* carefully to realise that conflict represents an important resource for social cohesion in groups and society, but also for social relationships among individuals [Simmel 1992]. For Simmel, conflict is a fundamentally uniting, or rather, is a type of relationship in which tensions which were caused by potentially antisocial elements will later work together. This aspect can even be noted in even matters which may be considered as irrelevant such as the case of road safety in a small town in North-Rhine Westphalia by Jan Holtje. The “fear factory”, an aptly named term coined by Luigi Ferrajoli, re-enters in that space between communication strategies and commonly used marketing policies. For others, such as Carlo Ginzburg, the contemporary world is similar to the one described in the verses of Hobbes’ Leviathan, where insecurity and fear risk creating new political theologies [Ginzburg 2015]. The sociologist Heinz Bude [2015] sees the Contemporary Age as being deeply marked by the principle of a society of fear, a hypothesis which is also supported by other historians, sociologists, philosophers and social scientists who have all studied the phenomenon of fear in recent years.

In terms of historical inquiry, however, a series of important issues related to methodology and interpretation are yet to be answered. Firstly, as has already been noted, the cultural history of emotions still seems hesitant to give a clear conceptual connotation to the word “fear”, and maybe has good reasons to be so. The semantic field of this concept is very large and the category of “fear” is often used as a synonym of threat, risk, panic, insecurity, all terms which have, in staying in the political and social field, a

strong impact in determining forms of inclusion and exclusion in the course of history by negotiating the boundaries between the self and the Other.

In staying on the topic of the constructing of social conventions, one may wonder to what extent in terms of group mobilisation and emotionalising did fear exercise such a fundamental influence on social interactions in, say, premodern society. Does modernity also bear the load of the specific natures of this topic? And finally one can consider whether there is an assignment of a specific heuristic to fear, an issue of great importance in the study of feelings in general. How can one empirically grasp an emotion, and which sources should one use? How can one write a history of fear over a long period of time? Are iconographical, linguistic and textual expressions, that collective of discursive configurations which are present in a given historic period, sufficient sources?

Finally, the issue that revolves around the temporal specificity of the cultural, political and social dimensions of fear is yet to be resolved. Are there other differences between Ancient History, Premodern History and Modern History? The essays assembled in this dossier aim at offering a response, albeit a partial and certainly not exhaustive one, to these queries.

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Note

1. See Corey 2004.
2. For an overall view of this trend see: Hitzer 2011; Verheyen 2010; Weber 2008; Saxer 2007; Ferente 2009; Petri 2012; Deluermoz et al. 2013.
3. For this line of research see Plamper 2012; see now the critical work of Schnell 2015.
4. Reddy 2009; Rosenwein 2002; Stearns 1985, 813-86. See also the interesting interview with Palmer 2010.
5. Referring to the feelings of honor, shame, empathy and compassion see Frevert 2013.