

BARBARA H. ROSENWEIN
AND RICCARDO CRISTIANI

What is the History of Emotions?



"It is hard to imagine a better introduction to this timely and important topic. Written by two scholars who know the terrain first-hand, this account will guide you through the debates and point you in the right direction for your own future studies."

Lynn Hunt, UCLA

"The book you hold in your hands is a crisp, accessible, and contemporary guide to the history of emotions. Rosenwein and Cristiani's practical approach will help students apply the theory of emotions to primary sources, making the book invaluable for beginners."

Jan Plamper, Goldsmiths, University of London

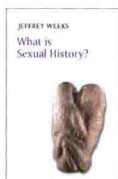
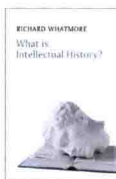
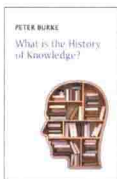
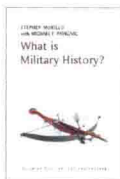
What is the History of Emotions? offers an accessible path through the thicket of approaches, debates, and past and current trends in the history of emotions. Although historians have always talked about how people felt in the past, it is only in the last two decades that they have found systematic and well-grounded ways to treat the topic.

Rosenwein and Cristiani begin with the science of emotion, explaining what contemporary psychologists and neuropsychologists think emotions are. They continue with the foundational approaches to the history of emotions, and treat in depth new work that emphasizes the role of the body and its gestures. Along the way, they discuss how ideas about emotions and their history have been incorporated into modern literature and technology, from children's books to videogames.

Students, teachers, and anyone else interested in emotions and how to think about them historically will find this book to be an indispensable and fascinating guide not only to the past but to what may lie ahead.

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and Riccardo Cristiani

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*For Joshua and Julian
In ricordo di Chiara Zevi*

Preface and Acknowledgments

We began to think about writing this book while working on *Generations of Feeling* together. Although the history of emotions has flourished in the last several decades, it is open to a wide variety of assumptions, expectations, and approaches. In many ways, it is still finding itself. We hope that this book will make following its many paths a bit easier. Writing it certainly helped us to see many unexpected coherencies and patterns.

While preparing this book, we have incurred many debts. We warmly thank Damien Boquet, Lynn Hunt, and Jan Plamper, whose comments and critiques on earlier drafts gave us welcome advice. Lale Behzadi, Maaïke van Berkel, Anthony Cardoza, Nicole Eustace, Timothy Gilfoyle, and Kyle Roberts helped with important sections. We are grateful to Fay Bound Alberti, Paolo Arcangeli, James Averill, Thomas Dixon, John Donoghue, Stephanie Downes, Ute Frevert, Erik Goosmann, Bernard Rimé, Lyndal Roper, and Tom Rosenwein. A teaching engagement at the University of Reykjavik allowed Barbara to try out some of the materials that are discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. She thanks the participants and organizers, especially Torfi H. Tulinius and Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon. Finally, we thank our editor at Polity Press, Pascal Porcheron, and the Press's anonymous readers, who commented with care and intelligence on an earlier draft.

Barbara H. Rosenwein and
Riccardo Cristiani
Sanremo, March 2017

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Introduction

“Is it really possible to tell someone else what one feels?”

Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

“I understand a fury in your words. But not your words.”

William Shakespeare, *Othello*, Act 4, Scene 2

When Othello walks into his wife’s bedroom, it is the way that he speaks, not his words, that she understands. “Let me see your eyes,” he says. “Look in my face.” Spoken tenderly, these could have been a lover’s request. Desdemona knows better. She understands that behind them is a “fury,” though she does not grasp its source. Othello begins to cry. “Alas the heavy day, why do you weep?” asks his wife.

These are the words of characters in a play written some four hundred years ago. They tell us some of the complex ways in which Shakespeare understood emotions and their expression. That we can still be moved by this scene means that we can be sympathetic to the emotional burdens of its protagonists. But are they our emotional burdens? And would we express them the same way? The history of emotions is dedicated to answering such questions. It 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.

In the last twenty-five years or so, emotions have become a kind of obsession in our culture. Now everyone – novelists, journalists, psychologists, neuropsychologists, philosophers,

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and sociologists – thinks and writes about emotions, each for his or her own purposes, each taking a different direction. Historians are no exception. While united in the goal of understanding the past of emotions, they have pursued it in a bewildering variety of ways. Anyone interested in the history of emotions – whether student, researcher, or simply curious reader – will find the terrain difficult without a map. That is what this book provides. It introduces the main avenues of modern research on emotions, starting with the psychological sciences, continuing with the various “schools” of historical thought on the topic, adding trends in current studies, and ending with a glimpse of the future. Much like a Google map, it suggests a variety of possible approaches so that readers may pursue their own historical inquiries. It is not the first book to survey the field, but it is the first to do so as both a short introduction and a guide to fledgling researchers.¹

The history of emotions relies on some sort of conception of what an emotion is. This is more problematic than it seems at first glance. How do we know – ironic as it may seem – that an emotion *is* an emotion? We know (or think we know) the answer. “How do you feel about that?” ask our relatives, spouses, friends, our therapist, or a TV reporter. “Happy,” or “angry”, we say, or we burst into tears, or our hearts beat faster. But how exactly are those words, tears, and beating hearts signs of emotions, or emotions themselves? What makes those words, gestures, and the concepts they embrace “emotions”? Are we born with them? Or do we learn them? Are they rational or irrational? Do we really know how we feel, or might it be better to say that emotions involve something beyond our knowledge?

These questions have occupied philosophers, physicians, and theologians for centuries and are now largely the province of scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists. Historians, too, have much to say. They know that past societies defined emotions in ways that may seem odd today. They know that the word “emotion” itself is slippery: even Western societies once used words like passions, affects, affections, sentiments, but had no word “emotion” as such. Indeed, the term is of fairly recent vintage, though “motion” and “movement” were often used in ages past. Historians also know that – whatever the term – these things that we today call emotions have been

defined differently at different times. The Romans thought that “benevolence” was an emotion, and the medieval scholastic Thomas Aquinas said the same of “weariness.” Few people today would agree.

Not that people today are of the same mind about what emotions are. In fact, there is considerable debate about how to define them, and the differences exist not only among disciplines but also within each of them. In this book, the scientific definitions – and they alone are legion – are the focus of Chapter 1. We begin with early definitions and modern disagreements, followed by discussions of the theories of two of the chief pioneers in the science of emotions, Darwin and James, and their modern heirs. While these theories tended to emphasize the body, the 1960s saw the development of cognitivist theories and, shortly thereafter, social constructionist discussions, both of which focused on the mind. Neuroscientists represent the most recent scientific developments; nevertheless, they generally work within one of these traditions and are therefore just as varied in their approaches.²

In Chapter 2 we begin our discussion of histories of emotions. Our emphasis here and throughout the book is on methods. We present the major questions and approaches that historians of emotions employ. If our examples of their results come largely from Western history, that is in part because much of the work on the topic has been Western in focus, and in part because that is the field most familiar to the authors of this book. But the methods themselves cut across all periods, fields, and continents.

After glancing at the “prehistory” of emotions historiography, Chapter 2 turns to the foundational work of Peter Stearns and his then-wife Carol Stearns, whose notion of “emotionology” was elaborated in the 1980s. Drawing on social constructionism, they separated “how people really felt” from “standards of emotional expression.” They looked at, for example, advice books that prescribed how and when to get angry or how to control anger – without worrying about whether people really “felt” angry. Standards changed over time, and thus (observed the Stearnses) a history of emotions was possible. Meanwhile, in the 1990s and early 2000s, William M. Reddy introduced the twin concepts of “emotional regimes” and “emotives” to make emotions the

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key to power and power the key to emotions. Emotional regimes, too, changed over time, particularly when they stifled emotional experimentation. Less all-encompassing and more varied than Reddy's emotional regimes were the "emotional communities" proposed – around the same time – by Barbara H. Rosenwein, one of the authors of this book. Emotional communities were (and are) groups of people who share the same or similar valuations of particular emotions, goals, and norms of emotional expression. In Rosenwein's view, the very variety of these communities were themselves agents of change as they interacted with one another and responded to changing circumstances. For various reasons and in a variety of ways, Stearns', Reddy's, and Rosenwein's approaches have all been cited and used by subsequent historians. While different, their theories have one important commonality: their emphasis is on texts and words. This is less true of the final foundational approach discussed in Chapter 2, that of Gerd Althoff and the notion of emotions as "performances." Although dependent on texts for descriptions of such performances, Althoff stressed the emotional gestures of the ruler's body to communicate his will to his subjects.

How do these different historical approaches work in concrete cases? We have chosen the Declaration of Independence of the United States to illustrate the four "in action." The Declaration is obviously famous if less evidently emotional. And yet, its repeated grievances suggest emotional gestures, and the one mention of "happiness" – whose pursuit is proclaimed a universal and inalienable right – poses instant, ineluctable questions to the historian of emotions.

At its core, "happiness" is just a word. Recently, many historians have become dissatisfied with the limits imposed by words and texts. After examining major current trends in such emotions studies, we came to realize that their common theme was the body, though defined in two main ways. In one, the body is bounded and autonomous. In the other, it is porous, open to – and even merging with – the world. Chapter 3 begins with the bounded body. Its many organs have at one time or another been associated with emotions; its flesh and viscera subject to pain. Gender, too, was originally tied to sex organs, but more recently has been seen as a sort of "performance." Elaborating on that approach,