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William M. Reddy

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## *The Navigation of Feeling*

In *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions*, William M. Reddy offers a new theory of emotions which both critiques and expands upon recent research in the fields of anthropology and psychology. Exploring the links between emotion and cognition, between culture and emotional expression, Reddy applies this theory of emotions to the processes of history. He demonstrates how emotions change over time, how emotions have an important impact on the course of events, and how different social orders either facilitate or constrain emotional life. In an investigation of Revolutionary France, where sentimentalism in literature and philosophy had promised a new and unprecedented kind of emotional liberty, Reddy's theory of emotions and historical change is successfully put to the test.

William M. Reddy is Willian T. Laprade Professor of History and Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Duke University. His previous books include *The Invisible Code: Honor and Sentiment in Postrevolutionary France, 1815–1848* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), and *Money and Liberty in Modern Europe: A Critique of Historical Understanding* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987). He has been a Guggenheim Fellow, a Fulbright Fellow, and a Fellow of the National Humanities Center.

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# THE NAVIGATION OF FEELING

A FRAMEWORK FOR THE HISTORY  
OF EMOTIONS

*William M. Reddy*

*Duke University*



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## *Preface*

"In the past twenty years," psychologists Kurt W. Fischer and June Price Tangney remarked in 1995, "there has been a revolution in the study of emotion" (p. 3). As I quickly found after beginning this project, theirs was no understatement. In experimental psychology alone, hundreds of studies of emotion have been published and new paradigms proposed since the mid-1970s. Other disciplines have developed new interest in emotions, for their own reasons. But, despite the many positive findings this new research has generated, the revolution has done little to clear up the vexed question of what, exactly, emotions are. Disagreements persist, uncertainties abound. Some researchers (such as Panksepp 1992; or Drevets & Raichle 1998) are convinced they have identified the biological and neural substrates of emotional arousal. But others insist that hormones, skin conductance levels, and cerebral blood flows are not "emotions." "No psychologist knows what anger, fear, or shame are independent of folk knowledge," said one group of psychologists recently (Shaver, Morgan, & Wu 1996:83).

Perhaps, then, emotions are nothing more than constructs of "folk knowledge"? "Emotion is culture," says ethnographer Benedicte Grima (1992:6). Anthropologist Niko Besnier – like most of his colleagues, slightly more circumspect than Grima – comes close to saying the same thing: "I do not wish to claim that all emotions are socially constructed, and that emotions are socially constructed in all contexts of social life"; nonetheless "many emotions are collectively constructed and crucially dependent on interaction with others for their development" (1995a:236).

But are these our only choices? Must emotions be either cultural or biological? We need new approaches to emotion, says literary critic Adela Pinch, "approaches that could think, for example, about what

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Wordsworth meant when he declared that the mind attaches itself to words, 'not only as symbols of . . . passion, but as *things*, active and efficient, which are of themselves part of the passion' (1995:109, emphasis in original).

The fact is that there is not one revolution in the study of emotions going on right now, but three, proceeding almost independently of each other. Psychologists have found ways of applying laboratory techniques devised for the study of cognition to questions involving emotion, sparking one revolution. Ethnographers have developed new field techniques and a new theoretical apparatus for understanding the cultural dimension of emotions, sparking a second. Finally, historians and literary critics have discovered that emotions have a kind of history (but what kind is not entirely clear). Scholars working on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in particular, have begun to trace out the rise and fall of an emotional revolution of the past, called "sentimentalism," or the "cult of sensibility" – a loosely organized set of impulses that played a role in cultural currents as diverse as Methodism, antislavery agitation, the rise of the novel, the French Revolution (including the Terror), and the birth of Romanticism.

The first two revolutions mentioned above, in psychology and anthropology, have at least some contact with each other. In addition, the trend in these two fields favors a convergence of views, at least on the level of findings if not on the level of theory or method. This convergence is toward a conception of emotions as largely (but not entirely) the products of learning. But historians and literary critics, with few exceptions (e.g., Stearns 1994), have shown little awareness of this development. They tend to regard ideas about emotions from the past as interesting, even fascinating, configurations to be understood as part of their own time. They have not asked themselves what relation such past ideas have to the "reality" of emotions.

For many anthropologists, literary critics, and historians, to ask any question about the reality of the self or experience these days is almost impossible. This is a problem that any attempt to develop a new theory of emotions must confront. It goes without saying, for many in these fields, that there is no one human reality, that human nature is plastic, a function of cultural and historical context. For this reason, many anthropologists consider research by cognitive psychologists (who *do* think they are examining what is really there) irrelevant to their own work. While I agree that psychologists often presume to know too

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much about human nature, I do not think this robs their work of all interest. Furthermore, contemporary critiques of empirical social science have their own problems. To presume that human nature is entirely variable (and therefore cannot be studied in a lab), entirely reshaped by every culture humans devise for themselves, is to open oneself to some glaring difficulties. Appreciation of these difficulties is an important preliminary step in the process of building the new theory of emotions presented here. This theory represents an attempt to get beyond these difficulties, without inadvertently sinking back into an ethnocentric, and aggressive, universalism.

One glaring difficulty with the presumption that human nature is entirely variable is that it implicitly abrogates any understanding of historical change. Why should a given historical context change, in any meaningful way, if it has the power to mold human nature and human experience, inside and out, to its own specifications? Suppose, however, that the context does change. The new cultural context is equally powerful; the life of the individual equally determined and confined by its structures. Why should such change matter to anyone? If we feel such change matters, perhaps it is just because of the peculiar cultural context that has shaped *us*. Another difficulty with this presumption is that it undermines any positive statements about rights and liberties. If human experience (including emotions) is perfectly malleable, if what we feel is purely a product of our cultural context, then why concern ourselves with the suffering of others or the liberty and dignity of the individual? Suffering, in distant times and places, becomes just another byproduct of a cultural context. Liberty becomes a purely modern Western preoccupation, of local significance only. No one is happy with these difficult implications of cultural relativism; but it is quite another thing to say, positively and convincingly, how to avoid them. Who would dare assert, today, without fear of falling into a conspicuous ethnocentrism, what human nature is or how human experience works?

By examining closely developments in all three of the ongoing revolutions, this study aims at elaborating a formal theory that establishes emotions as largely (but not entirely) learned. “Largely”: the theory leaves plenty of room for cultural variation. “But not entirely”: the theory establishes a core concept of emotions, universally applicable, that allows one to say what suffering is, and why we all deserve to live in freedom. With reference to this concept of emotions, historical



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change again becomes meaningful; history becomes a record of human efforts to conceptualize our emotional makeup, and to realize social and political orders attuned to its nature.

I am under no illusions as to the originality or likely salience of my efforts. Hundreds of scholars are working on all aspects of our thinking about the self, including the issues I am raising. Some will be discussed in these pages; others will not. To make the project manageable, I decided to keep the focus on work that deals explicitly and directly with emotions.

Others, already, have come very close to proposing a theory of emotions like the one offered here (e.g., De Sousa's [1987] notion of "bootstrapping" or Crapanzano's [1992] comparison of emotional expression with performatives). Numerous psychologists have noted in passing the issue that will prove to be central to this study. In 1989, Margaret Clark observed, "There is . . . some clear evidence that choosing to express an emotion or to cognitively rehearse it may intensify or even create the actual experience of that emotion while choosing to suppress it or not think about it may have the opposite effect" (p. 266). Phoebe Ellsworth has made a similar point: "The [emotional] process almost always begins before the name and almost always continues after it. The realization of the name [of the emotion] undoubtedly changes the feeling, simplifying and clarifying" (1994:192–193). But, until now, none of these insights has been put to use at the core of a new theory of emotion, designed to provide a framework for research within all three of the revolutions that are under way. This is not the first time in history such suggestions about emotional expression have been made. Wordsworth, in the passage cited above by Adela Pinch, was trying, it seems, to get at the same point. His contemporary, Germaine de Staël, made a very similar observation in a book published in 1800 (Staël 1800), where she argued that reading novels allowed people to have new, more nuanced, feelings. In this study, I accept that Clark, Ellsworth, Wordsworth, and Staël have it right. Emotion and emotional expression interact in a dynamic way. I provide evidence to suggest that this one aspect of emotional expression *is* universal, and I develop a framework for thinking about it. I try to show how this small concession to universalism is sufficient to ground both historical explanation and a defense of human liberty.

The study proceeds as follows. Part I provides a critical review of research and a new theoretical framework for dealing with emotions. In Chapters 1 and 2, I compare research in cognitive psychology and

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anthropology, to gauge the extent of convergence that is going on in these two fields, as well as the extent of conceptual blockage that has developed as new research findings have come up. In Chapter 3, I lay out a theory of emotions that accounts for the convergence of research results in these two fields, a theory that takes into account both (1) the reservations of poststructuralists about the implicit assumptions of a field of empirical research such as experimental psychology, and (2) the many critiques of the poststructuralist alternative to empiricism. In Chapter 4, I spell out how the theory presented in Chapter 3 offers a new way of understanding what I call “emotional regimes” and their relation to emotional experience and liberty. Part II offers a case study of historical change, using the proposed theory. I argue that emotions, as here conceived, had a direct impact on the course of change in that most important of transitions to modernity, the French Revolution. In Chapter 5, I examine the findings of new research into eighteenth-century sentimentalism and show how the theory of emotions presented here can explain the peculiar intensity of emotional expression in that period. In Chapters 6 and 7, I trace the changes in prevalent attitudes toward emotion that accompanied the transition from Old Regime, to Republic, to Napoleonic dictatorship, to a more stable constitutional monarchy. I show how emotions shaped this evolution, as well as how they were transformed by it. In Chapter 8, I provide an in-depth study of case material from the early nineteenth century, to show how the theory presented here can be applied to detailed research as well as to explore the kinds of emotional performance and suffering that characterized the aftermath of the Revolution. The Conclusion attempts to pull all the threads together and discuss, briefly, the implications of the study for our understanding of the present.

I have received a great deal of help during the preparation of this study. The National Humanities Center supported initial work on the project in 1995–1996. Papers derived from the research were presented to the Triangle French Studies Group, the Triangle Intellectual History Seminar, the European History Seminar at UCLA, and the Departments of History at Washington University in St. Louis, Johns Hopkins, Rochester, and the University of North Carolina. To the many participants in these seminars I owe thanks for their careful readings, helpful remarks, and encouragement. Aspects of the study were explored in articles that appeared in *Current Anthropology*, *Cultural Anthropology*, and the *Journal of Modern History*; I am grateful to the editors and their

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readers for their patient reviews of successive revisions of these progress reports, as well as to Frank Smith and the readers who helped with a near-final version of the manuscript at Cambridge. Constant and enthusiastic support, both material and emotional, has come from my spouse, Isabel Routh Reddy.

In the course of this project, I picked up the threads of many conversations I had in 1975–1976 with Michelle Z. Rosaldo, who was then at the Institute for Advanced Study working on her important ethnography of Ilongot emotions, and in 1976–1977 with Jerome Kagan, when, with a Research Training Fellowship from the Social Science Research Council, I had a year for postdoctoral work in developmental psychology. The questions those conversations posed for me stuck with me, and this book is, in a way, a belated acknowledgment of their importance to me and an attempt to continue them.

A note on translations: All translations from the French are by the author, except where otherwise indicated.