

Introduction

FEAR AND ITS OPPOSITES IN THE HISTORY OF EMOTIONS

MAX WEISS, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

What has been written on fear across the broad sweep of human history might seem to be as vast, as multidimensional, and yet also as basic as the emotion itself. Be that as it may, and perhaps because of the extent of the literature and the presumed elemental quality of the emotion, there have been far fewer attempts to systematically catalog or track the manifold discourses on and of fear that have been produced over time. In what follows I will draw on a few samples from the history of philosophical, political, and cultural inquiry into the “problem” of fear, in the process demonstrating that those who have spilled substantial amounts of ink tackling the issue cannot be said to agree on its content, its form, or—in terms that are relevant to the concrete meanings of the idea—its opposites.

One fruitful approach to the history of emotions—as in the history of ideas and mentalités, and in cultural and intellectual history more generally—has been the philological. Tracking the use and transformation of terms, phrases, and discourses on and about the emotions is one effective means of identifying social, cultural, and linguistic markers of emotional life in the past. To the extent that the historian of emotions is interested in ideas, however, there is always the danger, attested by the intellectual historian Quentin Skinner, of losing sight of the larger contextual forest. What this means, at least for Skinner, is that “if we wish to understand a given idea, even within a given culture and at a given time, we cannot simply concentrate...on studying the forms of words involved.”¹ This point seems even more significant in light of the fact that, as the wide-ranging linguistic, geographical, and historical contexts discussed in this volume attest, the semantics of fear words are quite diverse. Although the histories of fear included here rest upon broad and deep knowledge of the particular language(s) (in text and image, film and speech) of emotion in their respective world-historical contexts, they demonstrate the continuing relevance of Skinner’s simple yet profound insight into the relationship

between text and context in the history of ideas, and, it might be added, in the zone where both social and cultural history intersect with the history of ideas. In the remainder of this introduction, I would like to briefly sketch out some of the lineaments of the history and philosophy of emotion as it pertains to the problem of fear. In the process, my aim is to shed some light on the particular value of the essays included in *Facing Fear* insofar as they provide historical context to the skeletal history of fear (and terror, and anxiety, and panic) in its more limited guise as the history of an idea. To be sure, this introduction is by no means comprehensive and will only be able to touch upon a few, select instances.

In his far-reaching discussion of human experience, Spinoza does not contrast fear to its absence, which might be thought of as confidence or assurance, but rather makes a future-focused distinction between fear and hope. For Spinoza, “when we think that a certain thing which is yet to come is good and that it can happen, the soul assumes, in consequence of this, that form which we call *hope*, which is nothing else than a certain kind of joy, though mingled with some sorrow.” By contrast, “on the other hand, if we judge that that which may be coming is bad, then that form enters into our soul which we call *fear*.”² In light of the fact that temporality has been given extensive attention in much of the literature on the emotions in general, it is less interesting to note here that Spinoza situates hope in the future tense than it is to consider some of the arguments why fear ought to be located there as well. As we find in the contribution from Melani McAlister, Islamophobia is often activated within global Protestant evangelical networks as one means of fulminating and militating against a potentially dystopic future. Meanwhile, in his meditation on the ghostly Stalinist past in contemporary Russian culture, Alexander Etkind engages in a more personal exercise in hope as a means of warding off the resurrection of historical fears. Fear in the Spinozan futuristic sense requires a kind of sentience on the part of the subject, a particular experience of temporality that is (ostensibly) limited to human beings. A rather more materialist (and perhaps also reductionist) perspective on the emotions might position fear in the present, in terms of such biological responses as the fight-or-flight impulse, to name just one possibility.³

This sort of biological determinism in theorizing the emotions is most often associated with Charles Darwin, who is rightly identified as an essential innovator in the modern study of emotions. His conception of emotion is made quite clear in his brief discussion of fear and terror as embodied experience, one that is comprehensible even across the human-animal divide. In fact, for Darwin, the terms themselves—fear, terror, dread—are ostensibly traceable to “what is sudden and dangerous” and “the trembling of the vocal organs and body,” respectively: “Fear is often preceded by astonishment, and is so far akin to it, that both lead to the senses of sight

and hearing being instantly aroused. In both cases the eyes and mouth are widely opened, and the eyebrow raised. The frightened man at first stands like a statue motionless and breathless, or crouches down as if instinctively to escape observation.⁴ This physiological commonality purportedly linking man to other animals with respect to emotional experience is not only identified in terms of the actual states of being afraid, but is held up as evidence of deeper evolutionary connections. “We may likewise infer,” Darwin wrote, “that fear was expressed from an extremely remote period, in almost the same manner as it now is by man; namely, by trembling, the erection of the hair, cold perspiration, pallor, widely opened eyes, the relaxation of most of the muscles, and by the whole body cowering downwards or held motionless.”⁵ This argument raises interesting questions about the human-animal boundary, but might also create some problems for historians because of its unabashed ahistoricity. Natural history of this kind may allow for change over evolutionary time, but it fails to account for smaller-scale changes in the quality of emotional experience, to say nothing of the existence or emergence of local variations.⁶

The move away from biological determinism in the social sciences and the humanities, however, did not necessarily spell the demise of certain reductive interpretations of the nature of the emotions. For all its liberatory potential, Liberal philosophy reaches some of its own limits in discussions of, for example, the emotional life.⁷ “Liberalism,” according to Judith N. Shklar, “has only one overriding aim: to secure the political conditions that are necessary for the exercise of personal freedom.”⁸ For Shklar the fullest exercise and enjoyment of personal freedom—in both its “positive” and “negative” forms, as she follows Isaiah Berlin’s two concepts of liberty—“does not rest on a theory of moral pluralism,” and would have to be oriented absolutely in support of all that combats and seeks to vanquish fear: “Of fear it can be said without qualification that it is universal as it is physiological. It is a mental as well as a physical reaction, and it is common to animals as well as to human beings. To be alive is to be afraid.”⁹ Arguing for such a universal conception of fear, in particular, and the emotions, more generally, Shklar assaults critics of Liberalism for their ostensibly wrongheaded (if not irresponsible, in her opinion) claims about Liberalism being “unhistorical and an ethnocentric view.” It is the moral obligation and prime virtue, by contrast, of Liberal political philosophy to “offer the injured and insulted victims of most of the world’s traditional as well as revolutionary governments a genuine and practicable alternative to their present condition.”¹⁰

In tandem with other critiques of the blind spots of Liberal political and philosophical projects, however, there seems to be good cause here to reconsider whether such a universalizing impulse in the study of the emotions is warranted. Seeking to summarily halt any debate on the topic

of whether universalism is the solution to the world's political problems, Shklar concludes this section of her essay insisting upon the incontestable merit of rule of law promotion and strong centralized government by posing the following stark question: "Does anyone want to live in Beirut?"¹¹ Whether anyone would prefer to live in Beirut, particularly in the heyday of the horrific and bloody Lebanese civil wars of the 1980s when Shklar was writing, rather than an idealized and pristine liberal democracy, however, is a false choice. Regardless of the value of this rather schematic spectrum of political possibilities, an answer to the question proves to be hardly essential to the point Shklar wants to make. But the nearly incomprehensible irruption of "Beirut" here almost perfectly epitomizes the potential pitfalls of universal(izing) approaches to the problem of emotions and emotionality as much as to governance itself. Similarly, the intrusion of mythological human-animal hybrids into the thoroughly modern urban mediascape of Delhi so sharply analyzed by Ravi Sundaram suggests that universal models for the development and maintenance of Liberal political culture are far too simplistic to explain the complex transformations of human societies and cultures over time.

Shklar reifies experiences of chaos, terror, dislocation, everyday violence, and international intervention to a cipher—"Beirut"—that has little if anything to do with the physical or cultural spaces of that city. Indeed, it seems that the particular historical experience of fear among Beirutis during the 1980s, of Lebanese citizens during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, or of the inhabitants of the Middle East for the past hundred years are of hardly any consequence. Very much to the contrary, however, these are topics that would be of particularly profound consequence and significant interest for understanding new dimensions of such regional conflicts, as well as others, to say nothing of gleaning more of the texture and variety of historical experiences in the modern Middle East. In this sense, facing the fears that were catalogued by French philosophes in the aftermath of the Revolution or experienced as spectacle by Italian cinemagoers under Fascism, discussed by Ronald Schechter and Marla Stone respectively, might serve as helpful comparative models. Shklar may be right to defend the importance of "doing no harm" to the emotional life of individuals, but the centrality of that impulse in all related philosophical, political, and historical inquiry remains an open question.

In any event, the excesses of Liberal thinkers in the study of politics and the emotions need not rule out the potential for a revitalized understanding of emotionality and political life from within the Liberal tradition. For example, Charles Taylor prudently suggests, "we can't factor emotions out of what makes for good politics, grounded in reality and moral truth, nor out of what makes for democratic politics, in which people can be brought together."¹² But emotional worlds are not all of a piece, as they are

and have been influenced by complex interrelationships of social, cultural, political, psychological, and institutional forces that historians must often reckon with in studying and writing history.¹³ This is precisely why a history of fear, or, better, histories of fears—as exemplified by the variety of essays gathered together in *Facing Fear*—are useful for expanding our understanding of various dimensions of human experience, especially emotional experiences. Indeed, the infusion of historicism and greater attention to historical variation and contingency—as provided by Lisbeth Haas in relation to cultural difference within colonial encounters in the California borderlands, and through the monstrous visions of war in early modern Europe analyzed by David Lederer—could potentially help to overcome some of these limitations.

For political philosophers in the tradition exemplified by Shklar, the antidote to fear appears to be something like certainty and order, stability, routine, or security.¹⁴ Meanwhile, modernist philosophers might identify “progress” or “disenchantment” or, to put it somewhat crudely, “modernity” as the most obvious counterpoints to, and cures for, fear. The past two decades or so have witnessed the rapid expansion of social scientific and humanistic studies of “the emotions.” Although most often identified with a far more developed anthropological literature, the history of emotions, while initially recognized as one subfield of cultural or intellectual history, has decisively emerged as a full-blown field in its own right, with the explicit intention of offering deeper and more nuanced accounts of the range of human emotional experience.¹⁵ Perhaps identifiable as far back as the work of Lucien Febvre, and then reinfused by such historians as Theodore Zeldin, Peter Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, Barbara Rosenwein, and William Reddy, the history of emotions needs to be taken seriously not simply as an adjunct to cultural, intellectual, or social history but as a field that changes our understanding of those approaches to the past.¹⁶ As Febvre argued seventy years ago, “reconstituting the emotional life (*la vie affective*) of a given era is a task that is both extremely seductive and terribly difficult,” but one that “the historian has no right to desert.”¹⁷ In their influential article on the topic, Stearns and Stearns innovated a concept and category of analysis, namely, “emotionology”: “the attitudes or standards that a society, or a definable group within a society, maintains toward basic emotions and their appropriate expression; ways that institutions reflect and encourage these attitudes in human conduct.” Emotionology, then, could be contrasted to emotion itself, which they defined as “a complex set of interactions among subjective and objective factors, mediated through neural and/or hormonal systems, which gives rise to feelings (affective experiences as of pleasure or displeasure) and also general cognitive processes toward appraising the experience.”¹⁸ However reductive it may be critiqued as being, this distinction is also helpful in terms of schematizing

the relation between emotional experience and the production, regulation, or evaluation of emotionality. Regardless of whether historians choose to adopt wholesale the notion of emotionology, it is worth restating one central component of their argument, which returns to Febvre and a whole host of other historians, namely, the idea “that emotional change needs to be woven into the historical fabric seems unquestionable.”¹⁹

With respect to fear, in particular, it could be argued that the crux of this ethnographic and historiographic interest was to be found in the simple yet powerful notion that “human fears are most efficiently understood as social phenomena.”²⁰ The historian Joanna Bourke makes this point about the relationship between history and fear even more plainly: “History is saturated with emotions, of which fear may be one of the most relentless. . . . As with all emotional experiences, fear is about encounters.”²¹ The contributors to *Facing Fear* focus on fear in its intellectual, social, and political incarnations. This ranges from the experience of fear described by Charles Walker among eighteenth-century rebels, priests, and colonial administrators in Peru, to the technologically mediated experiences of anxiety and fear collectively felt by cinemagoers in Weimar Germany discussed by Andreas Killen. Other historians as well as political and cultural critics approach the subject of emotions through critical engagements with the problem of embodiment. In her detailed history of fear, which is primarily concerned with British and U.S. experiences, Bourke writes, “The emotion of fear is fundamentally about the body—its fleshiness and its precariousness. Fear is *felt*, and although the emotion of fear cannot be *reduced to* the sensation of fear, it is not present *without* sensation.” But in order to move beyond a purely biologically determined conception of “the body,” Bourke reminds us that “emotions are fundamentally *constituted*. In other words, agents are involved in creating the self in a dynamic process that, at the same time, is a ‘coming into being.’ In this way the body plays a role in social agency. The sensation of fear is not merely the ornament of the emotion.”²²

But the relentlessness of fear in history cannot be entirely attributed to the regularity of such frightful “encounters” or to the individual inscription and social collision of bodies. Indeed, the contemporary history of emotions literature alone does not tell the whole story of an almost obsessive level of interest in the emotions spreading throughout contemporary scholarly and intellectual culture.²³ As Sara Ahmed notes, contemporary culture is in the midst of a veritable “turn” to happiness, subsidiary in some ways to the more general “affective” or “emotional” turns but indubitably linked to those latter developments in other ways.²⁴ Ahmed develops some of these critical political and philosophical reflections on the turn to happiness in a recent book, *The Promise of Happiness*. The book begins with the notion of “the soft touch,” a metaphor employed to denote how “the nation is made vulnerable to abuse to abuse by its very openness to others.

The soft nation is too emotional, too easily moved by the demands of others, and too easily seduced into assuming that claims for asylum, as testimonies of injury, are narratives of truth.” Conversely, Ahmed identifies an “implicit demand [that] is for a nation that is less emotional, less open, less easily moved, one that is ‘hard,’ or ‘tough.’”²⁵ But moving beyond the simple reduction of emotions and “emotionality” to the antithesis or junior partner of reason (*ratio*), with the multiple and variously gendered ramifications of that conceptualization, Ahmed moves from what might be called the potential to the kinetic energy of emotional life. In other words, “rather than asking ‘What are emotions?’” Ahmed wonders, “What do emotions do?” Consequently, Ahmed’s approach does not “offer a singular theory of emotion, or one account of the work that emotions do,” but rather, “track[s] how emotions circulate between bodies... [in order] to situate [her] account of the ‘cultural politics’ of emotion within a very partial account of the history of thinking on emotions.”²⁶ Her interest in feminist and queer readings of emotions and affect can be read back to her earlier work on the cultural politics of emotion, in which she devoted an entire chapter to the “affective politics of fear.” In her view, the politics of fear are also comprehensible within an “affective economy,” one in which fear—as with other emotions, moods, and sensibilities—may “slide across signs and between bodies,” suggesting the possibility of the contagiousness of fear, and of emotions more generally in a given society, culture, or system.²⁷

If fear is slippery, and can slide around in this manner, it makes sense that Ahmed would identify the ways in which fear not only “shrinks the body” but also “may even allow some bodies to occupy more space through the identification with the collective body.”²⁸ Without unnecessarily simplifying her difficult and elegant argument about the affective politics of fear, or awkwardly imposing it upon the papers that appear in this volume, it might be provisionally concluded, with Ahmed, that fear may both structure the limits of emotional discourse and practice, while also at times filling those structures with various contents of emotional experience.

More recently, the political theorist Frank Furedi attempts to move beyond the general diagnosis of “liquid” or ever-present fear in contemporary society in order to attack the root problem underlying this recognized phenomenon.²⁹ Rather than being restricted to certain strands of political culture, and instead of arguing that certain actors use or abuse fear as a tool more than anyone else, Furedi gestures toward something more basic, something more systemic:

Fear has become the common currency of claims in general... In fact the narrative of fear has become so widely assimilated that it is now self-consciously expressed in a personalized and privatized

way. . . . In previous eras where the politics of fear had a powerful grasp . . . people rarely saw fear as an issue in its own right. . . . Today, however, public fears are rarely expressed in response to any specific event. Rather, the politics of fear captures a sensibility towards life in general.³⁰

But this rather vague and generalized sense of uncertainty, unsettledness, or vulnerability could be articulated in terms other than fear—dread, anxiety, nausea, to name just a few. Those terms have histories of their own as well, which link up with otherwise networked concept-histories that would go beyond as simplistic and reductive a narrative as a unitary “history of fear” or “politics of fear.” Therefore, although it is certainly true that “fear often serves as the foundation for public discourse,” historians and other analysts of fear should be careful not to mistake moods or episodes for timeless and essential historical truths or conditions.³¹ Each of the papers showcased in this volume is specifically concerned with a discrete historical moment, thereby emphasizing the variability and contingency of fears past, present, and future.

At the moment, and despite the great number of thinkers who have contrasted fear with hope (in the future tense), and although fear has often also been opposed to love or companionship along the lines of the phobic-philic dichotomy (in terms of the present), there has still not been much in the way of studying fear (and its many opposites) in the past in any great detail. There is quite a range and breadth of world-historical contexts, eras, and regions represented in this volume. But as I have only hinted in this essay, there is an unmistakable lacuna in the history of emotions literature more generally when it comes to certain world regions, most importantly Africa and the Middle East—regions regrettably absent in this book as well.³² Be that as it may, by situating fear in world-historical terms, the contributors to this volume provide indispensable nuance to our understanding of fear, both as a conceptual term and as a category of experience. Just as anthropologists over two decades ago recognized that attending to emotions and emotionality in their ethnography would “entail presenting a fuller view of *what is at stake* for people in everyday life,” in the context of both Western and non-Western societies, this approach also “might further humanize these others for the Western audience. That audience finds emotion at the core of being for reasons both cultural and political economic in origin, reasons that should simultaneously come under anthropological scrutiny. At issue is not only the humanity of our images, but the adequacy of our understanding of cultural and social forms.”³³

Many of the philosophers and historians of emotion discussed in this introduction identified counterpoints or analogues to fear, whether in the present or future tense, be that comfort, assurance, or hope. There are

surely other opposites, antonyms, or analogues that could be adduced in this connection. Taken together, this literature-in-information on fear and the emotions, as well as its attendant constellations of keywords, could provide illuminating insights into a deeper appreciation of the value of the study of fears past. We might yet go further in order to approach the history of fear in a spirit similar to how Andrew Shryock proposes thinking about the problem of Islamophobia, “namely, to understand how the concept solves and creates problems for those who use it, why it is necessary, what alternative sensibilities it brings into relief, and what histories come embedded in the term and its usage.”³⁴ One might invert the Islamophobe’s object of fear by considering an Islamic perspective on the matter of fear, namely, that whoever knows God shall know no fear, as evinced by Qur’an 10:62: “Behold, verily the friends of God have no fear, nor shall they grieve.” Without undue extrapolation, it might be further argued that those who have a healthy respect for the power of fear would seek to minimize the amount of suffering or grief that can be produced by a whole host of fears, including both the fear of others and those others’ fears. Such critically self-conscious but also historicized attention to the multiple histories and genealogies of fear would not necessarily or automatically translate into hope, courage, or certainty, as some of the thinkers and historians introduced in this essay would have expected, but what might perhaps be considered the ultimate aspiration of the historian and the humanistic enterprise: understanding.