Introduction: Adjusting to Fear in Early America

Lauric Henneton

Emotions Matter

In 1994, American sociologist Thomas J. Scheff lamented that “Emotions have disappeared not only from the statement and actions of governments but also from the writings of most scholars.” He hoped that “Building an alternative social science around the concept of human interdependence, and an alternative social psychology that speaks in the language of emotion, may be the most pressing problems for contemporary social science.” Seventeen years later, in an essay entitled “The Turn to Affect,” Johns Hopkins historian Ruth Leys wrote that for too long, scholars had overvalued the role of reason and rationality at the expense of emotions.¹ More specifically for this collection, in the introduction to one acclaimed recent volume, Nicole Eustace has called for a drastic revision of an eighteenth century that, she argues, was much less rational and much more emotional than historians had hitherto assumed. She writes in particular that

We are used to regarding the eighteenth century as the Age of Reason and to seeing the Enlightenment as dependent on the faculty of thought. Indeed, Enlightenment rationalism is generally credited with the defining role in developing theories of natural rights. Reason’s conceptual counterpoint, emotion, has seldom garnered the same attention. Though acknowledged as an important element in the Scottish school of moral philosophy, emotion’s influence has been thought to reside primarily in the private realm of family, faith, and fiction. So studies of eighteenth-century emotive history have paid close attention to the place of feeling in household functioning, religious awakenings, and literary flowering, but interest has more often waned when the topic has turned to political philosophy or power relations.²

¹ Thomas J. Scheff, Bloody Revenge: Emotions, Nationalism, and War (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994), 65, 143–144; Ruth Leys, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique,” Critical Inquiry 37, no. 3 (Spring 2011), 436. By way of acknowledgment, we would like to thank Anne-Claire Faucquez for the copy-editing assistance she has kindly provided as well as Leslie Choquette for commenting on this introduction and the two anonymous reviewers at Brill for their helpful remarks and suggestions.

² Nicole Eustace, Passion is the Gale: Emotion, Power and the Coming of the American Revolution (Durham, n.c.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Id., “The Sentimental Paradox:
However, it would be mistaken to assume that politics and power relations were devoid of emotions, and that the two are incompatible. Indeed, Matthew Kruer, of the University of Pennsylvania, has suggested that a focus on emotions and “emotional politics” could help us better understand such supposedly familiar events as “Bacon’s Rebellion” or the Susquehannock War of 1675 in Virginia. Proposing to study “the emotional basis of political subjectivity” and “the ways in which highly personal experiences become entangled with collective decision-making, and the ways that this transforms the shape of the body politic,” he has called for approaching “political subjects not as abstract entities but as necessarily embodied beings – beings that possess political desires, and who act in pursuit of those desires.”

Do these cases mean that Scheff’s call has been heeded? Has there been an “emotional turn” or an “affective turn”? William Reddy, one of the leading scholars in the field of the history of emotions prefers to call it a trend rather than a turn, but other scholars have been less cautious. Another leading scholar in the field, Peter Stearns, sees emotions as “an entirely valid, indeed important topic in social history,” while, in a similar vein, but thematically closer to our collection, Joanna Bourke has written that “fear has been one of the most significant driving forces in history, encouraging individuals to reflect more deeply and prompting them to action.” Lastly, to German historian Ute Frevert, emotions both have a history and make history. Our aim in this volume is to take a closer look at the transformational role in history of one emotion – or rather one range of emotions – namely, fear. As Barbara Rosenwein has recommended about emotions in general, this is not meant to be a history of fear, but rather an integration of fear into the history of early America.


