

“We Cannot Time-Travel on Our Emotions”

An Interview with Ute Frevert

Ute Frevert (*1954) is a historian of modern Europe and one of the leading figures in the history of emotions. She has held professorships at the Free University of Berlin, the University of Konstanz, the University of Bielefeld, and Yale University. In 2008, she joined the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin, where she founded the Center for the History of Emotions. Since 2023, she has served as President of the Max Weber Foundation. She is a member of several national academies and is a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy. Her books include *Men of Honour* (1995), *A Nation in Barracks* (2004), *Emotions in History – Lost and Found* (2011), *The Politics of Humiliation* (2020), *The Power of Emotions* (2023), and *Writing the History of Emotions* (2024). Jaromír Mrníka spoke with Ute Frevert in Prague on March 25, 2026, on the occasion of her visit to the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University.

JM: Across your work on social history, political culture, and the history of emotions, what has been the central intellectual problem that has guided you, and how has this problem evolved over time?

UF: Academically growing up in the 1970s as a social historian, I became intensely interested in how cultural habits and ascriptions were enshrined in and backed by social and political institutions. Very much attracted and influenced by feminist politics, I first focused on gender issues: how did ideas about gender difference enter into institutions like the family, school, university, the workplace, law, politics, the military? What kind of social practices served to translate them into daily experience and thus proved their validity and legitimacy? When and by whom did that legitimacy get contested? My work on duelling and honour culture was clearly indebted to those questions.

But it also opened another epistemological window: it brought in emotions, as a cultural phenomenon closely linked to social class, race, and gender. Emotions had been thoroughly neglected by historiography, even though they play – as we know from our own experience – such a huge role in people's lives, in their decision-making, in how they relate to others (humans, animals, things). Philosophers, medical doctors, and, above all, psychologists had, over the course of many centuries, tried to analyse and categorise emotions. Historians, however, had turned a blind eye to affective states and processes – even when they investigated emotionally loaded events like revolutions, social protests, and movements.

JM: At what point did you begin to treat emotions not as contextual background but as historically operative forces in their own right, and what theoretical or empirical impulse prompted this shift?

UF: In 1996, I gave my first lecture on why historians were “afraid of emotions”. I took inspiration from a small book written by the philosopher Günther Anders (who had once been married to Hannah Arendt). Anders, who had fled Nazi Germany together with his parents William and Clara Stern, wrote the book in light of family letters that he received after his parents passed away.¹ He was puzzled, first, by the predominant theme of love as it was discussed and negotiated in the 19th-century correspondence and, second, by how that discussion differed from his own observations and experiences. Consequently, he appealed to historians to take emotions seriously as a subject of research – which I did, with growing excitement. I soon discovered there had indeed been earlier historians interested in the field, like Lucien Febvre in the late 1930s, after witnessing a frenzied surge of emotions and emotionalisms connected to fascist movements.²

My own approach was twofold: it followed Anders by looking into how emotions have changed over time, and it borrowed from Febvre in asking how they have influenced people's actions and behaviour. In 1999, I started my first large research project. Thanks to the German

¹ GÜNTHER ANDERS, *Lieben gestern: Notizen zur Geschichte des Fühlens*, Munich 1986.

² LUCIEN FEBVRE, *La sensibilité et l'histoire, Comment reconstituer la vie affective d'autrefois?*, *Annales d'histoire sociale* 3/1941, pp. 5–20.

Research Foundation's Leibniz Prize, I was able to recruit a handful of junior scholars to work on the history of trust: how trust was (differently) conceptualised since medieval times, how it emerged (or not) in various social relations, in which domains it was deemed crucial and feasible, how people developed practices and institutions to build or rebuild trust, and what happened once trust broke down.³ I learned a lot (also about group dynamics), which was immensely helpful when, in early 2008, I founded the Center for the History of Emotions at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin.⁴ Here, the group of researchers was a lot larger, and comprised historians as well as anthropologists, sociologists, and scholars from literary studies. We agreed on two major assumptions: first, that emotions have a history, and second, that emotions make history. Emotions, in our understanding, were no background noise colouring historical events or developments. Instead, we assumed they had a strong influence on why and how these events and developments came into being.

JM: Do you regard emotion as a transhistorical analytical category, or is the concept itself historically contingent and embedded in specific epistemic traditions?

UF: We use "emotion" as an analytical category, but we are well aware that the category itself is historically contingent. In his 2003 book *From Passions to Emotions*, my colleague Thomas Dixon has shown how "emotions" were introduced around 1850 (only by English-speaking scholars) as a "secular psychological category" in pronounced opposition to reason and intellect – an opposition that had been far less strongly elaborated on in earlier concepts like passion, sentiment, affect, et cetera.⁵ At the Berlin Center, we did our first collaborative project on *Emotional Lexicons*. Examining the encyclopaedias that started to be published in many European countries during the 18th century, we initially found a wealth of words describing different affective phenomena with different meanings and connotations. Later on, these words were

³ UTE FREVERT, *The Moral Economy of Trust: Modern Trajectories*, London 2014.

⁴ History of Emotions, Insights into Research, <https://www.history-of-emotions.mpg.de> (accessed on 2 June 2026).

⁵ THOMAS DIXON, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category*, Cambridge 2003.

increasingly narrowed down until, in the 20th century, people were speaking about “emotions” or “feelings” *tout court* – terms that had not yet existed around 1750.⁶

JM: How do you analytically distinguish between emotions, affects, sentiments, and related terms without collapsing their differences, especially when working with historical sources?

UF: Building on the insights of *Emotional Lexicons*, we pay a great deal of attention to the contemporary meaning and scope of those terms, and shy away from imposing current concepts on what we find in our sources. Historicising emotions is all about acknowledging that our own understanding is not what people in former times experienced or reflected on. We cannot “travel” on our emotions – meaning, there is no direct bridge between “us” and “them,” ours and theirs. This is sometimes hard to convey, especially to those who believe that emotions are basic biological and anthropological entities formed through evolution. Such beliefs have a long life – especially when they are brought home by popular songs like Peggy Lee’s *Fever* from the 1950s (and its many cover versions). Here, Romeo and Juliet share the same feelings as Captain Smith and Pocahontas – and all of us who fall in love. A grand myth...

JM: When historians operationalise emotions, what should count as primary evidence, and how do you weigh language, practices, institutions, and normative frameworks in your interpretations?

UF: Historians find primary evidence in original sources, i.e. in (written or visual) material produced by contemporaries. These can be ego-documents like letters, diaries, autobiographies, but also newspaper articles, parliamentary reports, or court records. For the twentieth century, we also have audio sources, such as political speeches, radio transmissions, music, movies. In order to grasp the emotional effect of an orator, it makes a huge difference if we only rely on the written sentence or if we are able to listen to how it is spoken, pronounced, and modulated. Lan-

⁶ UTE FREVERT, CHRISTIAN BAILEY, PASCAL EITLER, BENNO GAMMERL, BETTINA HITZER, MARGRIT PERNAU, MONIQUE SCHEER, ANNE SCHMIDT, NINA VERHEYEN, *Emotional Lexicons: Continuity and Change in the Vocabulary of Feeling 1700–2000*, Oxford 2014.

guage, oral as well as written, serves as a major informant. But language not only transmits information about feelings, it also frames the way people experience feelings. And it teaches us a lot about cultural difference. Americans, for example, constantly tell us that they are *happy* – happy to be here, happy to see us, happy to give or take. Germans are far less inclined to report feelings of happiness. *Glück* (happiness) is reserved for very special moments and relationships, and so is love.

As much as language frames emotions, so do institutions. Being part of a family involves different emotions than participating in a religious service or a parliamentary session. As conscripted soldiers, men are confronted with feeling rules and expectations that differ from those of professionals. As we showed in our collaborative project *Feeling Political*, institutions template emotions, of different kinds, in different times and spaces.

JM: How do you address the problem of sincerity and the gap between performed emotion, narrated emotion, and lived experience in historical sources?

UF: It depends on the source. Let's take the example of court records. Defendants in criminal cases know only too well that their behaviour will most likely be reflected in the sentence. If they repent and show remorse, they will get a more lenient punishment, and so they adapt – without the judge or the (future) historian knowing if they truly feel remorse. They perform it, the record narrates it – but historians of course have reason to doubt. They might look for contradictions and traces of inconsistency if they are genuinely interested in the person's feelings. If, however, they are more into emotional framings and institutional set-ups and expectations, they will follow other traces and trajectories. Again, it depends – not just on the source, but mainly on what the historian herself wants to explore and find out.

The issue of dissimulation has haunted many generations of writers who have stressed the notion of sincerity and authenticity as a major distinction between the (ill-reputed) aristocracy and the morally immaculate middle classes. It does not haunt the historian who is well-versed in the art of *Quellenkritik* (source criticism).

JM: You have written extensively on emotional politics. How do modern states mobilise, regulate, or govern emotions, and which historical mechanisms have been particularly consequential?

UF: Emotional politics enter history once citizens enter politics. They are, therefore, a modern phenomenon, even though we can find precursors in early modern times. Participatory politics, as they were introduced during the nineteenth century, heavily rely on politicised emotions. Enthusiasm, outrage, resentment, adoration all had a strong motivating force, encouraging citizens to take action, either by (not) casting a ballot or (not) joining a protest movement. For their elected representatives, parliament was less a place to exchange niceties or rationally founded arguments; it was an arena of heated debate, passionate controversy, and unabated antagonism. Procedural rules as well as spatial arrangements were, from early on, seen as a means to curb those passions and prevent conflicts from becoming physically violent (as happened during the Weimar Republic and, more recently, in Türkiye and Georgia).

Similar strategies have been developed with regard to street politics, where the police have been increasingly advised and trained to deescalate aggressive situations and encounters. Liberal democracies have, by and large, been characterised by a certain reluctance to whip up political emotions; in any event, they cannot compare with the highly centralised efforts of authoritarian or totalitarian states to enlist and stage public emotions in the service of political goals and interests.

JM: What changes analytically when we conceptualise humiliation or shame as political technologies rather than as moral or psychological phenomena?

UF: Psychology mostly focuses on the individual person and what spurs her behaviour, unconsciously or not. Investigating the politics of humiliation and shaming radically changes the perspective. It looks at collective emotional practices through the lens of intentional strategies rather than conceiving of them as something that somehow happens – and has allegedly always happened – between people. We see how power functions and what means the powerful employ to keep others powerless. We become aware that shame is not only a feeling induced by my own perception of imperfection, but that it is used, in different forms and shapes,

by others (the state, the village, the school, the military, the workplace, etc.) to make this imperfection known and stick.

More often than not, those imperfections concern a social group rather than an individual person. As such, the politics of humiliation are extremely efficient in organising societies and inviting citizens to join in. Both fascist regimes and state socialism have gone very far in intentionally using such techniques and making people complicit in them.

JM: In contemporary mass politics, how should historians approach emotions such as resentment, indignation, or moral outrage without lapsing into psychologism or presentism?

UF: They should look, first and foremost, at those agents and institutions who either trigger those emotions or use them to carry out their own particular politics. Who are today's merchants of fear that enforce people's anxieties and doubts and, at the same time, promise to provide utmost security? How do they operate in comparison to other political actors? What kind of emotions do they target, positive or negative? Emotional politics are not heaven-sent. They are meticulously thought out and elaborated, by political parties and movements, by media, by certain institutions. Mass politics is not, unlike Gustave Le Bon's influential argument, about contagious emotions.⁷ It is about integrating individuals into "emotional communities" that are carefully crafted and constructed.

JM: What do you consider the principal epistemic risks in current scholarship on emotions, and how can interpretations in this field be subjected to meaningful critique?

UF: The greatest risk is, as mentioned above, to forget that emotions are as much historically contingent as any other human phenomenon. Historians have to remind themselves – similar to anthropologists – that their understanding of emotions is part of their particular life-world and cannot be transferred to former periods or other cultures. Reconstructing, say, the nineteenth-century meaning and scope of an emotion like envy demands delving deeply into historical semantics and emotional concepts before, in a second step, looking for cases and environments

⁷ GUSTAVE LE BON, *Psychologie des Foules*, Paris 1895.

in which practices of “envy” (or whatever contemporaries called it) appeared. Another risk is involved when we isolate single emotions. People often have “mixed feelings” about all kinds of things, and the mixture matters in explaining why they act the way they do.

JM: When moving from national to transnational or comparative perspectives, how do emotional repertoires travel across borders, and where do you see resistance or asymmetry in these transfers, particularly beyond Western Europe?

UF: Emotions do indeed travel, together with people. Going abroad, travellers meet people with different emotional styles, or with emotions that they cannot read and make sense of. One of the Center’s collaborative projects focused on such encounters by looking at missionaries, anthropologists, entrepreneurs, diplomats, soldiers, and lovers. All of these encounters are, in one way or another, asymmetrical, with colonialism proving the point.⁸

But even colonisers sometimes found themselves in situations that turned power into an emotional challenge. Think of George Orwell’s (autobiographical) essay *Shooting an Elephant*, from 1936.⁹ The narrator, a colonial police officer in Burma, is confronted with the tangible contempt and resentment of the local people. At one point, he feels cornered into killing a wild elephant, and complies, against his better judgement. He does so, full of anguish, in order to “avoid looking a fool”, and concludes: “My whole life, every white man’s life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at.” As Daniel Brückenhäus tells us in his forthcoming book, laughter, mockery, irony was an efficient emotional weapon of the colonised and very much feared by the colonisers.

JM: As President of the Max Weber Foundation, how do you assess the current position of the humanities in international research land-

⁸ *Encounters with Emotions: Negotiating Cultural Differences since Early Modernity*, (eds.) BENNO GAMMERL, PHILIPP NIELSEN, MARGRIT PERNAU, New York–Oxford 2019.

⁹ GEORGE ORWELL, *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays*, London 1950, pp. 31–40.

scapes, and what strategic priorities are necessary to sustain intellectually ambitious historical scholarship today?

UF: The humanities are in a difficult position (and have been there for many decades). Other disciplines within the life and natural sciences, not to mention neuroscience and AI, are far better regarded and financed, since they confidently promise to offer solutions for current problems (even if they often fall short of delivering). For a long time, though, we could stress the large number of students who chose to study history, philosophy, theology, or literature. That selling point is no longer valid, as students stay away or turn to other fields.

This is particularly harmful for disciplines that are considered rare and exotic – in German, we call them *Orchideenfach* ("orchid subjects"). As someone constantly knocking on the door of funding agencies (in our case, the German Ministry for Research), I know how hard it is to convince funders to spend money on research that does not meet standard definitions of relevance. We can mourn this, and emphasise the venerable tradition of *Geisteswissenschaft* (historical science). At the same time, we are forced to set strategic priorities and "sell" ourselves.

History is, in principle, well equipped to prove its relevance, even in areas that are not sought after by students. Current crises can better be understood with the help of historical knowledge, and this applies to Eastern Europe as much as to the Middle or the Far East. It is no secret that German ambassadors in Warsaw, Rome, Paris, London, Tokyo, Washington often seek – and receive – advice from local Max Weber Institutes...

JM: Looking back on your recent visit to Prague, was there a particular moment, conversation, or intellectual encounter that you found especially resonant, and what did you take away from it?

UF: There were many! I enjoyed talking to students who questioned me about the history of emotions. I met colleagues whose extremely meaningful and relevant research impresses me. I felt ashamed that I could not speak Czech, in contrast to so many local historians who speak fluent German. My only chagrin is that I could not answer the question in the affirmative if there would be, in the near future, a full-fledged Max Weber Institute in Prague. Compared to the rest of the world, we are already "overstretched" in Central and East-Central Europe. Current initiatives

point towards South America or Southeast Asia. But it is a pity – Prague is a fabulous place, with great colleagues and a rich and contested history that was, in many ways, connected to our own, in times good and bad.

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