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Teaching about the History of Fear

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Abstract

This article discusses existing approaches to teaching about a history of fear and their limitations. First, the possibility of basic changes in fear over the past three centuries deserves serious attention; there are relevant data and explanations. A second approach, focused on fear episodes, also has merit, including the opportunity to assess the reasons widespread fears recede. Without pretending a definitive model, historical perspectives contribute to our understanding of fear, just as fear deserves a more robust place in the growing field of emotions history.

For several years now I have been teaching an undergraduate course on the modern history of emotion, with a key section devoted to fear. Among the several specific emotions covered, I consistently find fear to be the most challenging, and I thought that some ruminations on the problem might be of wider interest, not only to teachers but to others eager to apply a historical perspective to this crucial emotional area.

The course is predicated on the belief, widely shared in the growing field of emotions history, that analyzing emotions in the past yields deeper understanding both of historical circumstances and of the process through which contemporary patterns in emotional standards and experience emerged.¹ Emotions historians argue that emotional standards and experiences in the past were somewhat different from those prevailing today, and that exploring the differences, and the patterns of change that gradually reshaped them, opens new understanding of emotional life. There is every reason to consider fear within this framework – but it is a demanding exercise.

There is no avoiding the challenge. Any definition of distinct emotions quite properly includes fear. Recent historical experience does the same: while the idea of emotions history predates the terrorist attacks, many younger practitioners, and not just in the United States, cite the trauma as 9/11 as the event that drew them into the field. I myself was spurred by what I thought were some debatable manifestations of fear into exploration of the emotion in the American historical context. So: fear should not monopolize the exploration of emotions historically, but it has a central place. – which brings us back to the complexities involved.²

My thanks to R. Michael Fisher and anonymous readers for suggestions on an earlier draft.

¹ Rob Boddice, *The History of Emotions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).

² Katie Barclay, Sharon Crozier-de Rosa and Peter N. Stearns, "Introduction," in *Sources for the History of Emotion* (London: Routledge, 2020); Peter N. Stearns, *American Fear: The Causes and Consequences of High Anxiety* (London: Routledge, 2006).

No emotion's history is easy, among other things because of the obvious difficulty in appreciating past cultures and unearthing evidence, particularly about actual emotional experience. But the modern history of love, at least in Western cultures, arguably has an identifiable trajectory: emphasis on romantic love began to swell in the 18th century, and the subsequent evolution can be traced at least to some extent. Shame was even more clearly redefined and in this case condemned in the 18th century, and ensuing developments, though complex – it is impossible to get rid of shame – at least have a definable focus. Even anger offers some clear periodization, particularly amid the growing efforts to control workplace anger in the 20th century: there is among other things the clear recent push toward anger “management”. Anger also benefits from some fascinating anthropological work, which makes it clear that anger cultures can vary regionally as well as chronologically.³

But fear is harder to tackle, or so I have found it. There is some excellent historical work, but as I will shortly indicate it is inconclusive in some crucial respects, at least to date. I'm also not sure that anthropologists help as much with this emotion as with others, though they certainly identify how certain cultures highlight particular fears and sometimes explore the fears of “primitive” societies.⁴ And of course, as a “basic” or primal emotion, fear may be open to less systematic variation or change as some more composite cases, though I am not convinced that this is the case. After all, other widely-recognized “basics”, like happiness as well as anger, have definite historical trajectories.

To date, historians have explored several options, all of them interesting and in some cases related but, again, cumulatively somewhat unfinished in terms of basic patterns of change. One approach, with several variants, tries to identify relatively systematic change, at least in moving from premodern to modern patterns. A second approach frames the history of fear more in terms of episodes or case studies. The central tension between the cumulative and episodic approaches revolves around the issue of whether any dominant modern trend or trends can be identified or whether instead the history of fear needs to be chopped up into discrete episodes, revealing but cumulatively relatively elusive. Both major approaches dispute any “basic emotions” claim that fear is simply a historical constant; both illustrate the importance of historical perspectives on the emotion. But the implications of the two are significantly different, and so is their message to students of fear from other disciplines.

The Cumulative Approach: Modern Fear as Different

There is first of all the sweeping statement, most clearly associated with Jean Delumeau but open to some further embellishment. Focusing mainly on Catholic Europe from the Middle Ages through the 18th century, Delumeau basically argues that a strong and pervasive emphasis on fear, both as warning and as major part of emotional life, was substantially undone by the impact of the Enlightenment. Religious insistence on the perils of hell and damnation declined. A variety of superstitious fears were gradually displaced by fuller scientific understanding, increasingly popularized. While fear was hardly eliminated, many people found it possible to reduce their experience of the emotion in normal daily life.⁵

³ Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006); Peter N. Stearns, *Shame: A Brief History* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Luke Fernandez and Susan J. Matt, *Bored, Lonely, Angry, Stupid: Changing Feelings about Technology, from the Telegraph to Twitter* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019); Jean L. Briggs, *Never in Anger: Portrait of an Eskimo Family* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

⁴ See for example, Robbins Burley, *Renssangri*

⁵ Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture, 13th-18th Centuries* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

The argument can be further extended. By the late 19th or early 20th centuries, threats of epidemics and famine receded in the Western world—two potent traditional sources of fear. More attention might also be paid to the advent of more abundant lighting, public and private alike, in reducing fears of the night. We have good historical evidence of how these amenities displaced strong traditional fears in southern Africa by the beginning of the 20th century, allowing workers, for example, to accept jobs that required their presence after dark.⁶ It is also true that some religions, like mainstream Protestantism, extended the moratorium on fear by reducing references to hell and damnation at least in Western society, and promoting visions of a more accessible and user-friendly heaven instead. On yet another front, changes in both the treatment of and attitudes toward animals have tended to reduce fear in interactions, in favor of more positive emotions most obviously with the growing array of pets.⁷

It is not completely far-fetched, in other words, to argue that despite all the undeniable issues with fear in contemporary industrial societies today, the emotion has become less vivid, less intrusive and more manageable than was the case in at least some societies in the past. Most current historians are skeptical of too much emphasis on progress, particularly in a domain as complex as emotional life, but there may be a claim when it comes to fear.

However, “progress” aside, an approach that relies on contrasting modern fear patterns with premodern already should raise real warning flags, despite Delumeau’s careful documentation. We know from other emotional histories, including anger, that facile comparisons of modern to premodern patterns are fraught with difficulty, because of the danger of glib overgeneralizations about the premodern; and fear has not been a heavy focus of the otherwise blossoming premodern emotions-historical literature.⁸ Delumeau himself may take theology too literally, in terms of popular emotional experience.

We also need to give attention to the role of beliefs and rituals around magic, in alleviating certain fears (despite stereotypes, white magic was more important than black) as well as in provoking them, and how the decline of magic may have removed an important resource against fear that scientific knowledge, at least for some, may not have entirely replaced.⁹ On another front, proponents of the idea of “Cartesian anxiety,” as skepticism undermined earlier religious certainties, turn the progress argument on its head by emphasizing how Enlightenment rationalism left a legacy of ontological fears in modern thought.¹⁰

More specifically: any approach emphasizing the decline of premodern fears must also allow for the possibility that new targets of fear moved in to replace the old.¹¹ Here, the modern history of fear might still emphasize changes away from premodern patterns, but toward new sources of the emotion rather than any moderating trend.

Delumeau himself, though without elaborating, talks about the rise of compelling new fears by the later 19th century, as concerns about degenerative disease, and the unseen deterioration of one’s own

⁶ Joseph Adjaye, *Time in the Black Experience* (Westport, CT: Prager, 1994).

⁷ Katherine Grier, *Pets in America: A History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

⁸ Barbara Rosenwein, *Anger: The Conflicted History of an Emotion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020).

⁹ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Penguin UK, 2003).

¹⁰ Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

¹¹ Theodore Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995).

body, began to replace the more traditional focus on contagion. There is a substantial scholarly literature on the emergence of new fears of death, as death became less visible, more often located in hospitals, increasingly removed – by doctors and funeral professionals – from family oversight. The whole argument about death as a new modern taboo is much debated, and recent analysis – though focused more on the past fifty years than the earlier 20th century – tends to downplay an extreme approach, arguing that moderns have developed a number of rituals, including more cheerful funerals, to cope adequately with the grim reaper. Still, modern society and death may not easily mix.¹²

Certainly, again by the 20th century, the emergence of new media, capable of quickly transmitting irrational prompts to fear, deserves consideration as against some simple pattern of modern fear reduction or improved management. To be sure, more traditional societies were frequently stirred to fear by the sheer force of rumor – see for example the Great Fear early in the French Revolution, so one does not need to overdo the novelty of radio, television and so on. But the famous British and American fictional radio shows that provoked mass panics in the 1920s and 1930s, certainly introduced new mass dynamics into the fear equation.¹³ By the 1970s, the combination of fictional crime dramas on television and increasingly sensationalist, on-the-scene reporting by the local newscasts, began to generate statistically irrational fears of crime rates, particularly in the United States – sometimes goaded further by politicians.¹⁴ All of this certainly muddies any claims about fear moderation in modern societies, though it is compatible with some real contrasts concerning the nature and sources of fear in recent history compared to earlier periods.

All of this unquestionably complicates any big claims about fear’s evolution over long periods of time, though I would argue that the interplay between claim and complexity can still generate informative debate. Furthermore, a few other pieces can be added to a cumulative argument, though they apply to more specific aspects of fear.

Two other data points warrant particular attention toward a nuanced argument about fear levels over time. First, it was in the late 18th and early 19th century, in Western society, that the practice of deliberately and voluntarily frightening oneself by fictional exposures to horror began to take new forms. There is a straight line from the rise of the Gothic novel, and masterpieces like *Frankenstein*, to the horror films of our own time. And while the phenomenon has been much studied – what kinds of people like to scare themselves, and why? – it deserves to be more closely linked to the larger modern story.¹⁵ Conceivably, as certain real fears declined – for example, fears of the night – some people simply needed to replace the thrill through new outlets, though ones that constrained real fear through the realization that the emotion would end as soon as one put the book down or, later, left the theater. The chronology, at the least, suggests this is a real possibility, and one that sheds light on several aspects of the modern fear experience.¹⁶

¹² Michael Hviid Jacobsen, “The Transformation of Death Discourse: From ‘Taboo’ to ‘Revival’ at the Threshold of the New Millennium”, in Peter Stearns, ed., *Modern History of Death* (London: Routledge, 2020).

¹³ Joanna Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2007).

¹⁴ Unfortunately a growing and excellent literature on relationships between new technologies and emotion has largely left fear by the wayside, in favor of anger, boredom and the like. There is room for more work here.; Luke Fernandez and Susan J. Matt, *Bored, Lonely, Angry, Stupid*.

¹⁵ David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: The Gothic Tradition*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 1996); Angela Wright, *Gothic Fiction: A reader’s guide to essential criticism* (London: Macmillan Education UK, 2007); M.L. Clasen, *Why Horror Seduces* (New York: Oxford, 2017).

¹⁶ It is also true that modern arts have enabled some individuals to “re-dramatize” and work through certain fears, providing opportunities for healing that are quite different from the entertainment role of fictionalized terror.

Second: in many Western countries a very real change in the use of fear in childrearing began to be urged by the early 19th century. Responsible parents were explicitly told, in virtually every childrearing manual, that fear should be carefully avoided in discipline. Old-fashioned bogeymen did far more harm than good, and now there were new ways, if only through more adult supervision, to keep children safe. Of course we do not know how many parents took this advice to heart, or how quickly, though it is revealing that, by the 20th century, childrearing manuals dropped the injunction not because fear tactics became fashionable again but because, by now, parents could be counted on to know the drill: don't scare kids unnecessarily. To be sure, this formula became complicated with the entry of psychologists like G. Stanley Hall in the later 19th century, who insisted that even with the most conscientious parents, kids would find plenty to be scared about anyway. This spurred new parental concerns about further protecting or reassuring children, and relying less on stiff upper lips in favor of prevention or coddling; but this merely intensified the hope to avoid fear in discipline. As parents became more conscious of the need to shield children from fears – like fears of the dark – they would have even more reason to avoid trying to scare their offspring into obedience.¹⁷

All of this may point to a plausible modern periodization for discussions of fear, at least in Western societies, and at least in terms of changes in sources of fear and assumptions about the role of the emotion in socialization. Pending further work, however, it remains a sketchy framework, particularly requiring more careful juxtapositions of modern and premodern experience. It does not really answer the question about changes in the level of fear – and perhaps, in truth, this is simply not a good question. It also does not deal clearly with perennial sources of fear that cut across convenient chronological boundaries, like the fears that have been associated with race in the United States for several centuries. Nor, finally, does it offer any careful comparisons. While we certainly have a sense that some societies have different fear targets from others, even in modern times, there have been no efforts to my knowledge to compare regional fear levels and cultures as part of a larger historical evaluation of modern trends.¹⁸ Thus an impressive critique of irrational American fears at the end of the 20th century said nothing about whether the phenomenon was at that point unusual, compared to kindred societies in other places.¹⁹ There is much still to think about.

A Second Approach: Key Episodes of Fear and Fear Management

The doubts and complexities that must attach to any cumulative argument about fear leads to the need to explore the second historical approach to the emotion, that is frankly agnostic on the subject of long-term changes or comparisons. It is quite clear that there is a verifiable fear history of key episodes in the experience of most societies, and the result, while not as ambitious or dramatic as a more sweeping claim,

¹⁷ Peter N. Stearns, *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style* (New York: NYU Press, 1994).

¹⁸ Interesting work has emerged on some characteristic, or possibly characteristic, German patterns of fear, from the early modern period on up to post-World War II. The analysis is first rate, but it has not yet ventured explicit comparisons with other national patterns. Again, there are further opportunities to explore in this domain. See Frank Beiss, *German Angst? Fear and Democracy in the Federal Republic Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Thomas Kehoe and Michael Pickering, eds., *Fear in the German Speaking World, 1600-2000* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020).

¹⁹ Peter N. Stearns, *American Fear*

can be quite revealing. Joanna Bourke's fine book on British and American fears offers a classic example of the episodic approach, but there are others – and certainly many additional opportunities.²⁰

One intriguing instance, of a fear episode bounded in time, centers on the widespread anxieties about burial alive, which began to develop in Britain and the United States (and possibly beyond), from the later 18th century, and extended vigorously into the first decades of the 20th. There were a host of symptoms, along with a great deal of public discussion including, around 1900, a batch of sensationalist press coverage that further stirred the emotional pot. Individuals tried to protect themselves, as in George Washington's order that he not be buried until at least two days after his apparent death. Devices were introduced, like coffins with bells so that a victim could signal to the outside world upon waking and realizing that there had been a terrible mistake. This was a vivid fear, whose origins can be traced and, up to a point at least, explained in terms of new understandings of resuscitation, active fears of medical error, lack of trust in public regulation as new hospital and burial practices were introduced.²¹

A more recent example: the nationwide fears of poisoned candy and applies with razor blades that circulated widely in the United States in 1982. This prompted active anxiety about neighborhood evil, a host of new regulations of trick-or-treating, and a novel parental obligation to accompany kids on their mendicant rounds. This is a fascinating fear because it was not grounded in fact, but on a quickly-accepted urban legend after a quite different and more limited episode of Tylenol poisoning (with largely adult victims) in the Chicago region. The fear's acceptance has actually never been completely undone, with the result that Halloween activities, for children, remain largely circumscribed. (Related and equally exaggerated fears of kidnapping began to crest in the same period, offering another episode to explore.)²²

Some fear instances involve policy considerations. The fears that surfaced after the explosion of the atomic bomb, and particularly after the Soviet Union acquired weaponry, have been examined, along with the decision, by concerned scientists, not to play up fear tactics in urging armaments control lest wild public response prove counterproductive. And while actual fears remained vivid for a while, arguably quite understandably, they actually receded more rapidly than might have been imagined, as many people simply got used to the threat and/or assumed that responsible behaviors would prevail. (The complex role of fear, including the possibility of negative reactions, in the current environmental crisis might be discussed with this episode in mind. Case studies encourage efforts to identify partial analogies to current emotional issues.)

Reactions to the 9/11 terrorist attack offer another opportunity for episode analysis, here with some possible comparisons to responses in other countries such as Britain, Spain and Israel (granting that terrorist acts vary widely in scope and impact, complicating the analysis). Arguably, the national response, with fear components well documented even geographically far distant from actual terrorist sites, were exacerbated not only by the magnitude of the attack and the role of media in endlessly recycling the horrifying images. The decision to evacuate the President, instead of offering immediate public

²⁰ It is worth that Bourke's ambitious canvass does include one argument about more systematic change, around the claim that the reduction of physical activity in modern military combat has increased the fear experience in battle from the early 20th century onward; Joanna Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History*.

²¹ Joanna Bourke, "Premature Burial and the Mysteries of Death", in Peter Stearns, ed., *Modern History of Death* (London: Routledge, 2020).

²² Ruthann Clay and Peter N. Stearns, "Revisiting the Fearful Parent: The Crucial Decade", *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 11, no. 2 (2018): 248-262. doi:10.1353/hcy.2018.0033.

appearances aimed at reassurance, and the recommendations that Americans stay indoors rather than risking public demonstrations of grief, resolve and anger, were arguably counterproductive.²³

For while the fear-episode approach has some obvious constraints analytically, it can support efforts at wider generalization. Attention to the role of modern media, based on the multiplication of fear involvements, is one obvious focus. More broadly, I am particularly struck by the desirability, as part of fear studies, of doing more systematic analysis, based on an accumulation of relevant episodes, on when a particular kind fear stops. Thanks to careful historical work over several generations, we can now answer this question with regard with witchcraft, by the later 17th/19th centuries. But there are many other opportunities. How and why did the widespread fears of smallpox vaccinations finally recede (and might there be lessons applicable to current vaccination fears)? Evaluations of why burial alive simply ceased provoking fear, after literally more than a century of impact, are actually even more interesting than why the phenomenon started in the first place. New patterns of trust, more systematic government requirements of certifications of death presumably finally took hold – and the media had to find other threats, real or imagined, to play on public emotion. Even racial fears or other group-based phobias can moderate, despite their deep roots, and again the factors involved are worth more attention. Here is an opportunity to combine focused generalization derived from historical case studies to a broader interest in fear management.²⁴

Summary Remarks

Two basic questions about the history of fear remain, insofar as I can judge, unanswered. Both are highly relevant to an understanding of fear today. Both, in my view, support the earlier claim that (perhaps unsurprisingly) fear is an unusually complex emotion to handle historically.

The first is the fundamental issue of whether fear, at a societal level, changes over time, or whether it merely shifts targets (itself important, where historical work on episodes does provide important information). Perhaps the question will remain open, though work on other, broadly similar emotions like anger continues to suggest that we might be able to do better, whether in terms of arguments about “progress” (with occasional regression) or some other approach.²⁵

The second brings us back to the comparative challenge, which should receive more attention. Are some societies, at certain periods of time and around common issues like health threats or terrorism, more prone to fear than others, and if so why, and what can we learn from any differences?

In the meantime, beyond insisting on the need for more data and more refined analysis, we can take some real satisfaction in the achievements already available, both along lines of debating the possibility of long-term changes and around the exploration of key episodes (including the cases of ultimate improvements in fear management). I am not sure that historians of emotion are ever likely to adopt the label of fearology – we can be a bit stuffy; but there is every reason to promote greater communication between historical insights, current and forthcoming, and the larger field.²⁶ Certainly, a discussion of fear

²³ Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture At the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

²⁴ Peter N. Stearns, *American Fear*

²⁵ Theodore Zeldin, *Intimate History*

²⁶ R.M. Fisher, *The World's Fearlessness Teachings: a critical integral approach to fear management/education for the 21st century* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America/Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), 48 and passim.

and its complexities as part of teaching about the history of emotion measurably helps students think about the emotion and its contemporary risks and peculiarities ; and that can be a step toward more constructive management. Lessons from history do not always require certainty.

Bio

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