

HISTORY OF EMOTIONS AND (GLOBAL) CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION:

an interview with Ute Frevert

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ABOUT THE INTERVIEW

The interview with Ute Frevert took place in her office at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development (Max Planck Institut für Bildungsforschung - MPIB), in Berlin, in the context of a research project on the socio-emotional domain in global citizenship education. As defined by UNESCO, emotion, cognition and attitude or behaviour are the three dimensions educators should focus on to equip people to face the social, political and environmental challenges of our times on a local, regional and planetary scale. As we know from research and experience, emotions play a key role in this triad, although they are sometimes underestimated in our rationalist culture. Ute Frevert's work makes us aware of the historical and contextual character of emotions, helping us thus to overcome a simplistic approach in our pedagogical practices. Emotions shape and are shaped by economy, emotions shape and are shaped by politics, as they shape and are shaped by all institutional arrangements that make up our social world.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE

From 2008 until her retirement in 2024, Ute Frevert was Director of the Center for the History of Emotions at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin, Germany, and Professor at the Freie Universität Berlin. Between 2003 and 2007, she was (full) Professor of German History at Yale University (USA), having previously taught at the Universities of Berlin, Konstanz, and Bielefeld (Germany). She is a member of the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina, the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, and corresponding fellow of the British Academy. Ute Frevert was awarded the prestigious Leibniz Price in 1998 and received the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany in 2016 for her groundbreaking work on modern history. Her honorary doctorate from the University of Tampere (Finland) dates from 2018. In 2020, she was honoured with the Sigmund Freud Prize for Scientific Prose awarded by the German Academy for Language and Literature.

INTERVIEW

D.R.S. – Danilo Romeu Streck;

U.F. – Ute Frevert.

D.R.S. *Thank you very much for granting this interview. I would like to start this conversation by asking about your professional training, the interests and questions that led you to deal with the history of emotions.*

U.F. First, it is on me to thank you for your interest in my work. I started studying history with a strong interest in social history and – we are talking about the 1970s here – when social history was, I would say, a sexy topic in more progressive German universities. Later on, I added an interest in culture and meaning-making; gender, it goes without saying, was on my agenda very early on. Finally, I ended up at emotions that I consider highly cultural, highly genderized or gendered, but also very much tied to social issues and social groups. So, in a way, the history of emotions was fed from all these preceding interests. One more thing: from my early student days, I always approached history with a sense of how it matters in current times. In this sense, I was and I have remained very political. I try to be aware of what goes on in the world, in my society and other societies. And what I observe as a citizen then informs, very often, my historical forays.

D.R.S. *Let us come to your work in Berlin. You founded the Center for the History of Emotions at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in 2008.¹ How does a research center or program come to be hosted by the Institute? What were some of the major challenges you encountered?*

U.F. Let us start with the institutional part. Max Planck Institutes and their directors are autonomous in terms of deciding what they want to research. When institutes recruit new directors, they are given the chance to choose their topics independently. They are also given a large budget which allows them to employ a group of researchers with whom they want to work. When my predecessor left the MPIB, the remaining directors settled on me as a social and cultural historian who might add broader perspectives on human

¹ The Center concluded its work on June 30 2024, after 16 years of activity. For more information see <https://www.mpib-berlin.mpg.de/research/research-centers/history-of-emotions>.

development. At that time, I was a full professor at Yale University, and I was quite happy there. But I found the opportunity to set up a new research field and build my own center very attractive, and I have always been in love with Berlin as a city. So I accepted the offer.

Choosing the topic of emotions was not all too difficult. I myself had taken an interest in the history of emotions during the mid-1990s. I had worked on trust for some time. Since the other directors at MPIB were psychologists, emotions might, so I hoped, form a sort of common ground and build a bridge between our disciplines. In fact, this turned out to be a major challenge. Through talks and conversations, I gradually became aware how differently a psychologist approaches his or her subject from how a historian would in terms of sources and methods. Historians tend to ask questions that can only be answered by taking into account a multitude of explanatory factors. They construct their topic in very broad and complex ways. This makes psychologists nervous. Their methods privilege focusing on one variable that causes a certain controllable outcome. As historians, we cannot do this, life is just too messy. Besides different questions and methods, the culture of scientific work is different as well. As a young pre- or postdoc in history, you are taught to be curious about many things. You read books and articles that do not bear any affinity to your own project. You are eager to engage with others, even from other disciplines. Young PhD students in psychology, at least those that I have met here, are much more focused. They know that they have to get out three papers within three years, and so they turn exclusively to the topics and methods that apply to them. Shutting out everything else makes cross-disciplinary communication very difficult. This notwithstanding, our scientific advisory board regularly urged us to collaborate and take advantage of the privilege of having more than one discipline at the Institute. We tried our very best, but I doubt that we really met the challenge.

D.R.S. *You chose to work with emotions in modernity. Was there a particular reason for prioritizing this historical period?*

U.F. First, I am myself a historian who works on the 19th and 20th centuries. Second, I do think that the modern period has a lot to offer to historians of emotions as there have been many shifts and divergences in terms of

emotional practices and styles. In addition, multiple regime changes affected what could be felt and how these feelings might be expressed. They also came with different attempts to instrumentalize emotions for political ends, or what I call “emotional politics”. Third, we opened up the spectrum of modern societies to be studied beyond Europe. At the beginning, we had a strong focus on South Asia as a region where, since the eighteenth century, European colonial powers confronted various indigenous traditions of having and staging emotions. Later, we included projects on Japan, China, Africa and South America.

D.R.S. *Emotions are a complex and slippery notion that challenges researchers in philosophy, sociology, psychology and other fields. As historian, what is the understanding of emotions you are dealing with, and how do you differentiate emotions from feelings, or passions, for example?*

U.F. Our first collaborative project took on that very task by constructing a modern genealogy of emotional terms. We looked at British, French, and German encyclopedias and lexicons from the eighteenth century until today and how they defined words like feeling, sensation, drive, lust, affect, passion, and the like. We also analysed how and why certain words retreated while others came to dominate the linguistic map, such as “emotion”. And we tried to explain what this development meant. Do we really understand the world of feeling better when we use, uniformly, the word emotion, with its foundation in twentieth-century Anglo psychology? What was lost in terms of diversity, variety, distinction? What can we learn about older worlds of feeling by consulting former theologians, philosophers, medical doctors, who all held quite distinctive views on emotional phenomena?

D.R.S. *You have dealt with a great variety of emotions in your research. Which ones revealed the greatest potential for understanding life in modernity and therefore deserved more attention in your studies?*

U.F. I am biased! For me, honour counts among the most important emotions. It is older than modernity, but it still has a role to play in contemporary societies. When I wrote my book on duelling (Frevert, 1995), I started with the assumption that honour was a thing of the past. I found it with “men of honour” who populated European societies of the nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries. Those men, I thought, are no longer with us. But I was wrong. Just look at instances of dishonour or humiliation as they are perceived in daily interactions, both in private and public life. Taking away or withholding respect, lowering somebody's reputation and self-esteem affects his or her social standing and is regarded as insulting. Some groups take it more seriously than others; male adolescents seem to be particularly sensitive to those issues. So honour is still around, even if we prefer now to call it dignity. It comes in many shades and variations, depending on age, gender, class, and ethnicity. It plays out in social differentiation and group formation, but also in international politics where the language of honour is still very much in place. Putin built his case against the West mainly on the allegation that Russia's national honour was being besmirched.

The other emotion that is very dear to my heart is trust, *Vertrauen*. Trust is a key emotion that pervades modern politics, the economy, social relations, and intimate encounters. It is a perfectly modern emotion which replaces the older notion of fidelity, *Treue*. I could mention others, of course, like love, or envy, or pride. What interests me most is the public life of emotions, and I therefore favour those that go beyond the so-called private sphere.

D.R.S. *Politics and the economy are among the fields where you have looked at emotions. How do you see emotions playing out in the present international context, where we are confronted with great uncertainties and injustices, like the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Is there something like a geopolitics of emotions, as suggested by Dominique Moïsi (2010)?*

U.F. I hesitate to subscribe to clear-cut emotional distinctions between “the West”, “the Arabs” and “Asia”. It might be intuitively helpful to think of Europeans as fearful, of Arabs as easily humiliated and prone to hatred, and Asians as being given to hope. But mapping emotions geographically or geopolitically is a very questionable way of making sense of different societies or cultures. Societies are always complex and do not dance to a single tune. This holds even more true when it comes to whole continents or huge populations across nation-states. Besides, there is always more than one emotion that characterizes a national or regional or religiously defined mindset. It is not for nothing that we tend to speak of “mixed emotions”. Singling out one emotion that is supposed to dominate all others does not

live up to reality. It is a highly artificial and reductive way of ordering the messy world around us.

D.R.S. *Going on with our conversation, most of us are worried about drastic climatic changes, which are also linked to the idea of progress that characterizes modernity. Can emotions be enacted to face these challenges? Are there historical examples that would help us to deal with the crisis, which, by some is considered a civilization crisis?*

U.F. The climate crisis has an ambivalent feel. On the one hand, we know for sure that it is coming. It is already here, with flooding, heat waves, drought, tsunamis in many places of the world. This is a clear thing, and most people see it. On the other hand, for those of us who are not living in Bangladesh or on some Pacific Island, it is still pretty easy to push it out of our attention. We tend to do that because if we were confronting ourselves with those facts and figures and the kind of scaling up, we would have to change in a way that would be very painful for all of us. So we try to avoid the truth and “duck and cover”. That’s what people were recommended to do in the 1950s when they were scared of the atomic bomb. But this kind of naïve escapism should definitely not serve as an example to emulate or learn from. Rather, the question is how to kindle and sustain hope. Not hope in miracles that come to us without our own doing. What I have in mind is hope or even confidence that we can make the world a better place by actively living up to its challenges. We should neither panic or despair in light of those challenges nor retreat to a state of denial or negligence. Instead, we should learn from former crises. Of course, they differed from the ones we face today. Yet contemporary witnesses found them at least equally catastrophic. Just think of the Thirty-Years-War that, together with hunger and plagues, decimated regional populations by two thirds. Or think of what happened in Ukraine between 1914 and 1945 when every other man and one out of four women died a violent death. And still, hope did not die, at least for those who survived the carnage, and it made them start anew. Hope plus confidence and determination to improve the world are badly needed today. Plus, responsible leaders who are elected because they face the challenges ahead and offer practicable as well as sustainable ways to meet them.

D.R.S. *Thanks for the words of hope. I am coordinating a UNESCO chair in education for global citizenship education and social environmental justice, hosted by the University of Caxias do Sul in South Brazil. UNESCO identifies three domains for global citizenship education: the cognitive, the socio-emotional and the behavioural or attitudinal. From your experience, what is the role of emotions within this triad?*

U.F. You cannot have cognition without emotion. And you cannot have emotion without cognition. What you think and perceive is guided by emotions, and what you feel has a lot to do with cognitive procedures. The interplay is nicely captured by the new word “cogmotion”. It is an artificial word, of course, but it pictures how perceptions, thoughts, judgments and emotions work together. Once you reach a decision on the cogmotional level, this might have behavioural consequences. They in turn influence your perceptions, thoughts, imaginations and emotions. The three domains are closely connected. We can see emotions working as a kind of bridge between “the cognitive” and “the behavioural”. They tie up cognitive processes as they guide our perceptions and imaginations, and they tie up behaviour and attitudes. Emotions are practical, they are performed and thus serve as crucial means of communication between people. By “doing emotions”, we form attitudes and channel behaviour.

D.R.S. *It seems to me that in education we deal with emotions in a rather simplistic way, without considering the historical and social context in which emotions are templated. What role can or should education play in educating or templating emotions for a healthy emotional life or for a healthy life?*

U.F. Templating emotions: this is a concept we developed in a collaborative project on “Feeling Political” (Frevert, Pahl et al., 2022). In what eventually became a book we looked at emotions through the institutional lens. We assumed that institutions like families, schools, the military, law, churches, social welfare etc., have a strong impact on how emotions are perceived, felt and practiced. And we tried to prove our assumptions through historical case studies. As to your question: What can education do to template emotions? Above all, I consider it one of the major tasks of education and schooling to make children and adolescents emotionally intelligent. The notion of emotional intelligence as it has been popularized by Daniel Goleman (1998) goes back to far older concepts of empathy and fellow-feeling developed

since the eighteenth century. They are about people's capacity, willingness and preparedness to look at one's own emotions and the emotions of others, to moderate emotions, to reason about the way one does emotions and communicates through emotions. Such reasoning is crucial to all kinds of social behaviour in all domains. Education should alert us to how we can and should be emotionally aware and "intelligent", understand other people's attitudes and open up to them rather than closing the door. It should also empower us to stand up to our own attitudes and beliefs – and, at the same time, critically reflect on them. How were they shaped? What kind of experiences were paramount? What was left out and behind, on purpose or by accident? Against this background of critical self-reflection: how can we approach other people's emotions – say, on the question of Middle Eastern politics – and search for common ground despite different point of views?

D.R.S. *This is something I am after when I suggest that we are dealing with emotions in a quite simplistic way, like being nice to your colleague, having empathy with those who are close to you but forgetting the larger picture of emotional life. We don't embed the complexity of emotions in the historical social context, how they are formed and why.*

U.F. It is always helpful to go back to "the ancients", in this case scholars like Adam Smith (2000)² and his theory of moral sentiments from the mid-eighteenth century. Here, he explains how people usually feel towards one another, and how they should model and moderate their emotions so that they can facilitate communication. Just imagine you are talking to a friend, and this friend is grieving; he is crying and wailing, in a way that overwhelms you. What do you do? You retreat. You can't even console him. He is so consumed by his emotions that it distances him from the rest of the world. Moderation is easy to understand but difficult to practice. To tune down your emotions in a way that makes them approachable to others is prerequisite to any real exchange. This is not only true in private affairs, but also in politics.

D.R.S. *You mentioned Adam Smith as a historical reference. Could you identify some other historical references for us who want to study the history of emotions*

² Adam Smith's book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* was first published in 1759.

U.F. There are many. Philosophers were, since ancient times, the first to make sense of passions and affections. During the nineteenth century, Charles Darwin (2000)³ made a splash with his 1872 book on the expression of emotions in man and animal. It greatly influenced the American psychologist Paul Ekman (2011) and his theory of six or seven basic and universal emotions. This theory has received widespread criticism, especially from historians. But it is still very influential, especially in affect studies. Historians of science can, of course, show how and why certain theories about emotions flourish at a certain time in a certain society. What is behind universalist assumptions? Why do other scholars put emphasis on differentiation? In any case, we need to be critical and reflect on the limitations of our theories. At present, neuroscientists inform us about who we are and how our emotions function. Some of them talk, self-assertively, about our “stone age brains”, claiming that nothing ever changes. How do they know? Others try to show the brain’s plasticity and assume that neural networks change through reorganization – which invites us to think about learning experiences. We might even assume that such experiences are transmitted across generations, which allows for societal and cultural factors to enter the picture. So history is back in, as well as cultural variation.

D.R.S. *I still have a methodological question. Given your long experience in research with emotions, more precisely, with the history of emotions, what are some recommendations or tips for research in the field, what should young and also experienced researchers avoid? What do they need to pay attention to?*

U.F. First, we need more case studies that show how emotions have an impact on historical events and developments. Second, the field would benefit from long-term analysis of how emotions change over time, together with the institutions that template them. Third, researchers might want to look at emotional styles prevalent in certain social or religious groups, among men and women, in specific age cohorts; they might also go a step further and study how such emotional styles change and why. Fourth, cross-cultural comparison is a challenge, within societies and internationally. Fifth, let’s not forget the body and its history. For ages, emotions have been firmly located in human bodies. But bodies are by no means ahistorical. The way we

³ The book *The expression of the emotions in man and animals* was first published in 1872.

look at bodies, perceive bodies and describe emotions as physiologically felt, greatly differs in time and space. Modern bodies that are trained and modelled through sports, plastic surgery or mechanized work are different “vessels” of emotion than bodies that undergo other forms of treatment. Historicizing the body means historicizing emotions and bidding farewell to notions of unchangeable “affects”.

D.R.S. *In the literature we come across concepts like emotional structures, emotional regimes, and emotional communities. Are these the same? Which one would be more appropriate for studying emotions, especially if we intend to compare groups, cultures and societies.*

U.F. They are definitely not the same. Barbara Rosenwein’s (2011) notion of emotional communities is based in medieval societies and refers to small-scale organisations. It might make sense to depict a monastery as an emotional community; it is far less convincing to conceive of contemporary schools or universities as such. There is also an epistemological issue here. For Rosenwein, emotional communities are more or less equivalent to social communities. But what do we mean exactly when we assume that social groups share certain emotions? Do we argue that emotions are formative for the group? Or do we emphasize that emotions result from group coherence and group experience? As to the notion of emotional regime that goes back to William Reddy’s (2001) seminal work, I find it too stable and hierarchical. A regime is something imposed on you “from above”, that you have to embody and incorporate. It is too tight a concept to capture the dynamic emotional processes that happen in and through human interaction. Personally, I prefer to work with notions of emotional style and practice. Style is something that is chosen, by individuals as well as by social groups, like adolescents. They develop their own emotional style, and they share it as a group. They take incentives from fashion, cosmetics, music, whatever. And they come up with a certain way of practising emotions among themselves and with the wider world. Such emotional practice is also meant to distinguish the group from others; style thus becomes a social marker. At the same time, it is never stable. It is, rather, fluid and as such works well with emotions that are also highly fluid.

D.R.S. *We have covered a lot of issues. Is there something that you would like to share? Maybe a last question: What are your projects for the future?*

U.F. I have just finished a new book on “Constitutional feelings” in German history (Verfassungsgefühle. Die Deutschen und ihre Staatsgrundgesetze, Wallstein, 2024). It was inspired by the 75th anniversary of the German Basic Law which was enacted four years after the end of WWII. Since 1949, the Basic Law has seen amazing emotional shifts. In the beginning, people either did not know about it or did not care. Step by step, and through multiple political struggles, it became ever more popular. Today, many people declare their love to the Constitution and praise it as the most trustworthy institution in German politics. This reminds one of the early nineteenth century when citizens were fighting for new or better constitutions and developed cult-like rituals with utmost emotional appeal. In the book, I trace people’s feelings towards constitutions from 1789 till today. I try to show how basic rights become more and more important, not only to defend the individual citizen against state power but also to protect life in a civil society. During the postwar period, I look at both West and East Germany, and I also cover the thirty-five years after reunification with regular calls for a new and common constitution.

As for new and upcoming projects, I can tell you more in a year or two.

D.R.S. *We can continue our conversation now off the record. I thank you very much for sharing something of the very important work you are doing at the Center for History of Emotions. I am sure that I also speak on behalf of the many readers of this enlightening and lively conversation.*

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