Emotional remodelling: sketching emotion regimes in the United States since 1900

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This article highlights the concept of emotion regime while discussing available applications. It then applies the regime concept to two distinct periods in 20th-century US history: the first, from early in the century through the 1950s, stressing emotional restraint, and the more recent opening to more vigorous emotional expression. The article ends with a discussion of the causes and significance of the change.

Keywords emotion regime • affective turn • anger • fear • love

The United States has arguably experienced two emotion regimes over the past century, defined as normative frameworks within which people are urged to select, monitor and express their emotions and evaluate those of others. The emotion regime concept is an ambitious one – more on that at various points later in the article – but for a particular society, it can help explain the emotional tenor of a period, with impacts on an array of individual feelings, both positive and negative. Experts and popularisers of various sorts – including those who write advice literature for families and individuals; jurists and legislators; and a wide array of organisations – push the message forward, inevitably with varying degrees of success amid a diverse population. Popular culture contributes – an emotion regime is not necessarily formed only from the top down. At least in democratic societies, politicians model the preferred styles. By the same token, a shift from one regime to another constitutes an important change, raising questions about causation while inviting assessment of results.

I venture the two-regime hypothesis for several reasons. First, it is important to continue encouraging emotions historians – not all of them, but a decent sample – to work on recent historical periods, up to our own. While we can hope to interest the other disciplines that try to understand emotion in our work on classical or medieval eras, we join them most directly when we tackle the modern. And there are certainly a host of developments remaining to be explored, where emotions...
Historians can contribute directly to a grasp of current patterns and issues. Again, this is not for everyone – the flourishing of a wide chronology in emotions history attests to that – but a discussion of at least one approach to recent frameworks may promote a desirable balance.

Testing the emotions regime concept itself, in a recent iteration, is worth attention in its own right. William Reddy introduced the idea a couple of decades ago, focusing on a shift in French emotional signals after the Great Revolution; the concept has been widely cited but perhaps not put into play as often as might be desirable. But as a device to help organise chronology and basic analysis – again, a service to other relevant disciplines as well – it has much to be said for it (Reddy, 2001).

To be sure, the idea of an emotion regime, or even a more relaxed term such as emotional style, might be a fool’s quest for a society as large and complex as the US over the past century. Reddy’s work aside, there are not many applications of the emotion regime concept as a framework for charting change over time at a national level, with a few notable exceptions. A recent article explicitly assumes a distinctive emotional regime in contemporary China – an interesting but not explicitly historical application of the concept (Jantzen et al, 2012; Mao, 2023). Several historians who have successfully worked on a particular regime have arguably narrowed the target – this is not a criticism, simply a statement of the complexity of the factors involved. Issues of social class loom large: for example, a recent study on France, following up on Reddy’s focus on new levels of restraint after the French Revolution, specifies only a slice of the urban bourgeoisie (Flower, 2018; Davidson, 2019). The regime notion can centre more on defining other kinds of groups than on delineating chronological periods. Thus, in the groundbreaking work by Monique Scheer on enthusiasm, the regime idea has been used primarily to identify emotional communities within a region, though chronology is taken into account (Scheer, 2019). There’s a lot to work out here in returning to an interest in regional change, between the emotional cues urged by experts and elites (the most obvious component of a ‘regime’) and wider emotional experience and evaluation. Nevertheless, I think there is a phenomenon worth exploring in the recent US case, at least as a stimulus to a more thorough and nuanced approach. But this current comment is a sketch at best, inviting critique.

And finally, a personal note. My most ambitious work on the history of emotion in the US, American Cool, came out now almost three decades ago. Not surprisingly, a lot has happened since, and while I think many of the book’s findings hold up pretty well, they did not anticipate the arrival of a ‘new regime’. Perhaps they should have – that’s a peril in doing recent history; but in any event, the opportunity for a postscript comment is too good to pass up (Stearns, 1994).

We begin with an intriguing though admittedly flawed data set – though this was not the source of the initial hypothesis. Google Ngrams offer an opportunity to assess the frequency with which a word or term is used over time, compared with all other possibilities, based on a massive online book file. Use of Ngrams has become familiar for many modern emotions historians, though it remains variable; and it’s fair to note that some students like them, because of the puzzling questions they raise, particularly about causation. More to the point here, there’s no question that the Ngrams reveal substantial shifts in emotional references, depending on the period.

The graphs that result from an Ngram search do not say why frequency changes, or indeed whether the change is significant or merely the result of habituation; they do not prove that people were not using the terms at the same rate in other venues,
just not in books. They do not indicate whether the decline in the use of a term suggests that issues had been resolved, or (unless one searches further) whether some other term took over. Does an emotion word rise in the rankings because it becomes problematic or because it gains a greater welcome? (See for example the decline in references to happiness during the first half of the 20th century, in a culture that, we know, both sought and valued the emotion.) Further, the charts do not account for shifts in word meaning – a point to which we will return. So, the graphs are suggestive at best, and at their worst give historians like me a misleading quantitative veneer (Zhang, 2015).

In the case of key emotions in US English, however, the trend lines from 1850–1950 are remarkably similar, and I believe we know on other grounds that this is more than coincidental (see Figure 1). From the mid-19th century or a bit before, references to love drop in relative usage – at the outset, this might particularly reflect the decline of Romantic sensibility. But the same decline applies to sadness and happiness; to guilt and shame; to disgust; to jealousy and envy. Fear declines. Grief reflects the trend: among other things, the 1920s was the decade in which the idea of using therapy to restrain emotion picks up steam. The drop-off in anger is less marked, but it is there. Attention was turning to other topics, again relatively speaking, as exploring emotional expression declined in emphasis. Furthermore, the downward curves were generally fairly steep, usually into the 1920s, after which many stabilised.

Then, however, although a bit variably, the emotion references increase, in most cases markedly. In some instances, this starts near the middle of the 20th century,

Figure 1: Emotion reference trends

Note: Emotion words relative frequency: US English, 1850–present.

Source: Google Ngrams, accessed 29 February 2024.
in others a bit later. But uniformly a further surge occurs from the 1980s onwards. Changes are particularly striking on the negative-emotion side, but there is movement in the positive camp. Fear, to take one case, is flat in the middle decades of the 20th century, but then sharply up from 1980 onwards (Glassner, 1999). The new trajectory of shame doesn’t start until 1980. Guilt, flat in the middle decades after a big drop-off, begins its climb earlier, from the 1950s. The surge in anger, and to a lesser extent grief, again mainly at the end of the 20th century, is particularly marked. Happiness, and particularly ‘happy’, enjoy a boost, but it is both more modest and starts later, kicking in only around 2000: positive psychology? Trend lines for sadness are fascinating. This emotion had a brief blip in the early 19th century, in terms of relative frequency, after which graph lines were fairly flat. But then there was a noticeable increase in references from the 1980s onwards.

This pattern invites further exploration toward identifying two quite different emotion regimes – one in which emotionality and emotional intensity were discouraged, the other almost the reverse.

Again, a case based on Ngrams alone could be dismissed readily enough, and when we turn to the second, current regime some key evidentiary problems will be obvious. But a good bit of work has been done on the patterns running through the first six decades of the 20th century that suggests the decline in usage reflected the adoption of a new set of quietly restrictive emotional standards – a new regime, following on the heels of Victorian sentimentality. And if that is so, the reversals in momentum deserve historical attention as well.

For the first, more constrictive regime, anger and grief have drawn particular attention, where sometimes complicated Victorian standards were simplified in favour of greater control – particularly after 1900. Grief should be restrained, as mourning practices were cut back accordingly. A variety of popularisers urged that people learn to keep grief in check, lest it bother others, or seek professional help (Farrell, 1980; Laderman, 2003). Even more obviously, anger had no place at work, and a bevy of industrial psychologists began to devise ways to keep it under wraps (Stearns and Stearns, 1986). But love came in for knocks as well: feminists and male magazine writers both worried about its cloying qualities; a new breed of marriage experts warned about emotion-based choices; and a variety of commentators targeted motherlove, often rather viciously (Morton Robinson, 1934; Terman, 1936; Bailey, 1989; Coontz, 2006). In other words, a bevy of experts, popularisers and managers, in fields ranging from funeral practices to corporate workplaces to family and childrearing advice literature, were urging new emotional standards and these standards pointed in a similar direction. This might constitute a regime.

More broadly – for there is no need here to repeat available findings – a number of scholars have suggested a wider process of emotional deintensification during much of the 20th century. Dutch sociologists, notably Abram de Swaan and Cas Wouters, who have worked on growing informality in several 20th-century Western societies, including the US, point to a resultant need to keep the heat low as formal manners loosened (de Swaan, 1981; Wouters, 2007). In the US, two psychologists, Stephanie Shields and Beth Koster, highlighted the phenomenon as they charted childrearing advice from 1900 onwards. They noted the increased urgency directed against emotions like anger, but particularly identified concern that mothers’ emotions too easily ran ‘out of control’ in ways that damaged children; fathers were praised for their greater emotional objectivity (Shields and Koster, 1985). Rob Boddice has
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commented on a deintensification trend from another angle, as have I in *American Cool* (Stearns, 1994; Boddice, 2019).

This does not mean the table is fully set for recent emotion regime #1. As with any discussion of the regime concept, the framework invites exploration of the groups primarily doing the standard setting, as well as the nature of standards they set – just as in the better-established regime exploration in revolutionary and post-revolutionary France (here too, with a middle class looming large). However, testing the impact against a population as varied as that of the US is an equally important challenge, and this has not really been done for the 20th century. Both identifiable ‘emotional communities’, including religious clusters, and more familiar ethnic and social groups deserve attention, in their reactions to the new norms. Regional cultures warrant exploration as well, in the 20th-century context.

Beyond this, a few specific anomalies deserve note: I am puzzled at the sharp decline in references to happiness, given what we know about the overall culture – this may be a case where Ngrams mislead. Nor, I think, do we fully understand why the basic shift toward deintensification occurred, beyond the obvious self-interests of corporate groups eager to curb workplace anger and professional psychologists eager to sell their services to businesses and individuals alike, plus, in fairness, the new reactions to objective changes such as the rapid decline in child mortality which helped redefine approaches to grief.

But a full consideration of the shift toward more open emotionality, from the later 20th century onwards, is at least as inviting a target for historical analysis – recent as it has been. And it may offer a particularly focused opportunity to interact with other emotion-exploring disciplines, equally interested in what’s going on now. A multidisciplinary, many-authored piece in *Nature Human Behavior* recently proclaimed the ‘era of affectivism’, and (if the new era is indeed upon us) historians (who were represented in the *Nature* statement), can unquestionably help elucidate how it emerged and how it contrasts with its predecessor (Dukes et al, 2021).

There is an obvious chicken-and-egg problem with this one. There is no question that the Ngrams reveal a striking increase in emotion talk over the past fifty years, embracing virtually all the major emotions with only slightly varying chronologies. But is this simply because, after a period in which emotion had been downplayed in scientific inquiry, more researchers climbed on the emotion bandwagon – ultimately including the new and rapidly growing number of historians of emotion but also the explicit rise of neuroscience and the ‘affective turn’ in disciplines like sociology and geography from the 1960s onwards – or because the kind of emotion regime that helps guide emotional expression shifted ground (Beiss and Gross, 2016)? Surely a bit of both – emotions research may have risen in part because of the recognition of a new set of parameters – but setting the balance is not easy.

There is no need to be guided simply by Ngrams – though the contemporary-historical angle has only been sketched at best. We know that rising anger was not fuelled by expert study alone – the success of shock radio, particularly from 1988 onwards tapped a wellspring that had either survived the anger control efforts of the earlier decades or, more probably, had surged more recently. A significant population segment felt newly authorised to vent their rage (Berry and Sobieraj, 2011; Schrobadorff, 2017; Fernandez and Matt, 2019). By the 21st century even politicians, long urged to keep anger under wraps, found that it now paid to let loose: whereas aspirants to a national political role had been explicitly advised, through the
Obama administration, that displays of anger would be seen as dangerously immature, the pattern shifted abruptly with the campaigns of 2016 and beyond (Reich, 1997). Growing preoccupation with grief, though it warrants more attention, certainly followed from efforts, from the 1960s onwards to modify the medicalisation of death – here was a case where attempts to constrict an emotion had gone too far, inviting readjustment (Kubler-Ross, 1969). Rising invocations of shame, another rebound case, were followed in part by new partisan divisions and, later on, opportunities on social media (Stearns, 2017). Shifts in the military approach to fear, with more candid discussion and the huge opening provided by the PSTD diagnosis, developing mainly after the 1960s though with some precedents, offer a fascinating case in point, fully in keeping with the notion of a larger regime change. It became more acceptable, even arguably popular, to discuss fear openly (Crocq, 2000). Other specific trends await exploration: why did references to disgust increase, after the long decline, as new sanitary standards came into effect (Corbin, 1986)? (And is this not a case where word meaning has probably shifted significantly?) How should the increased references to love be calibrated against the rapidly rising diversity of family forms and, more pointedly, the increase in living singly? (References to falling out of love increased markedly in the same period, after low levels of use previously.) In other words, how can we use the possibility of a new emotion regime to explore the particular paths of a host of individual feelings?

Causation has to be a key issue – probably never fully resolvable, but important in grasping the nature of the change involved. We have already noted this as a challenge in dealing with the first 20th-century regime, though there has been some relevant analysis; it looms large in assessing the new framework. And while William Reddy could point to the travails of the French Revolution as the dominant factor in the shift from one regime to the next in early 19th-century France, in his pioneering effort, it seems likely that a change in emotion regime often constitutes the kind of shift that depends on a wider variety of factors.

Four or five certainly spring to mind. My undergraduate students would immediately opt for technology, a link that Luke Fernandez and Susan Matt have already begun to explore. But it is important to note that the initial surge toward wider emotionality predates even the internet, and certainly social media, although the role of these developments as enhancers is pretty clear (and don’t forget the impact of TV). Changes in how news was delivered, from the 1970s onwards, must be factored in, certainly in enhancing US references to fear (Fernandez and Matt, 2019).

More intense political and cultural partisanship may have contributed, though it is vital to recognise that both major factions participate in the shift – for example, both are eager to use shame against the other. Links between political and social turmoil and emotion regime are already well established, and they may certainly have been involved in the unfolding of a new framework in recent decades. At the same time, there is a conundrum on this one: heightened divisions clearly fuel more open expression of some emotions, but more open emotionality also contributes to the fraught political climate – as had been the case in the late 18th-century revolutionary era (Reddy, 2001; Eustace, 2011).

The continued surge of service sector jobs, over manufacturing, surely played a role. Between 1945–71, for example, and 2001–15, workers in the hospitality and tourism sectors increased from 8 per cent to 28 per cent of the non-agricultural labour force. This meant, in turn, that more and more employees were involved in
fairly explicit ‘emotion work’, and in many cases were receiving some direct training in preparation (Hochschild, 2012; US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).

The gender factor is intriguing, as it evolves from the Victorian era to the 20th century, to the contemporary. Second-wave feminism urged new kinds of gender equality, in some cases with considerable success; however, it also stressed the superiority of female emotional openness – a marked contrast to the tenor of much of the discussion of gendered emotion in the previous regime. However inaccurately stereotypical, what was seen as the male emotional style and its lack of expressiveness was put on the defensive and has largely remained so: references to ‘toxic masculinity’ begin to inform some feminist and ‘male liberationist’ assessments from the 1980s onwards. There are some cultural landmines here, in suggesting that changes in gender balance affect emotion regimes, but the shift deserves attention as part of the introduction of a dominant new style (Pleck, 1983; Bosson and Vandello, 2011; Croft et al, 2021)

Then, even more obviously, there is the role of psychology, broadly construed, as the mantra ‘how do you feel about that’ increasingly rivalled ‘what do you think’, with rapidly rising Ngram chart lines from the 1950s onwards. The increasing ‘psychologising’ of US culture was noted as early as the 1960s and has continued apace (Rieff, 1966; Wright, 2019). The discovery and urgent publicising of new mental health drugs began to contribute even a decade before (Tone, 2009). Perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, at least compared with other Western countries, US citizens became unusually open to psychological findings and therapies; even as some stigmas lingered, currently only about 25 per cent of the US population continues to find admitting to a need for therapy demeaning, compared with upwards of 45 per cent in the UK and Germany (Tikkanen et al, 2020). Evaluating the chicken-and-egg issue – did the psychological turn cause the new regime, or result from it? – looms large in this regard. And all this apart from the obvious probability that further analysis will uncover additional factors.

Continuities from one regime to the next highlight another useful historical staple, that can and should be applied to regime change. Even as emotionality increased in measurable ways by the early 21st century, US children’s stories, for example, remained measurably more emotionally restrained than their counterparts in countries such as Russia (Chentsova-Dutton, 2021), while child-targeted TV shows like Mr Rogers, popular into the 21st century, radiated systematic calm. A key part of helicopter parenting continued to emphasise protecting kids against emotional extremes. Even for adults, anger management, another clear legacy of the older approach, retained a strong hold, as did continued efforts to gain greater control over shame and shaming. Generational issues are obvious, as a newer regime opens up. Utilising the emotion regime concept does not mean abandoning connections from one framework to the next, and historians are primed to contribute here.

Ultimately, the comparative angle will be vital – still underdeveloped in much emotions research, historical or otherwise. Have other societies widely shared in this kind of 20th-century transition? The US pattern seems distinctive, as noted in the unusually high levels of accepting therapy, but there is no claim here that it is unique. The emotion-regime concept needs regional definition, which can only come from comparative work.

How often do emotion regimes change? My biggest hesitation in extending the concept, particularly to the contemporary period, is that it risks inviting the same kind
of inflation of frequency that has occurred, particularly in the US, with the idea of
generations. Real and systematic emotion regime shifts are surely not common – as
opposed to adjustments within an existing framework. Having two in little more than
a century may be unusual – just as, in the Reddy example, the French Revolution
was unusual. Emotions historians can both explore regime transitions and try to keep
inflation under control. In some cases, a certain degree of pendulum swing may be
involved, as the constraints of one regime help open an alternative.

With all the caveats, and the additional data and analysis required, the idea of a
fairly recent regime transition remains an intriguing one (and not just for the US)
– certainly for modern historians, but also for practitioners in other disciplines. It
offers at least one way to discuss how current emotional issues, from emotional health
concerns to the efficacy of shaming or the odd status of both contemporary love and
contemporary anger, have emerged from the past, and how emotion management itself
has been redefined. No question, embracing the contemporary in historical analysis
has a host of particular challenges – including a higher-than-average likelihood of
being wrong – but it surely belongs in the wheelhouse of emotions historians and
others who explore emotional change at the societal level.

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