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# **THEORIZING EMOTIONS**

Sociological Explorations and Applications

campus



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# Extreme Feelings and Feelings at Extremes

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The general aim of this chapter is to show that selected pre- and post-war classics of sociology interwove their discussions of the question of order with references to emotions. In fact they never left emotions out of their theorizing about social order. More specifically, I will demonstrate that some theorists believed that the social and political order constitutes an effective barrier to lurking, upsetting emotions, or even to life-and-limb threatening instincts and affects. Other theorists posited individuals as being both aware and wary of the painful emotions that threaten to surface when orderly interactions become upset. These theorists suggested that in order to prevent this from happening, individuals as social actors are willing to cooperate in sustaining social norms and conventional patterns of interactions. Taken together they surprise by their shared view that the social order and successful social interactions block negative emotions. More or less explicit in their writings is the idea that if we—as individuals and as social collectives—do not co-operate in sustaining political and social (interactive) order, we make each other and ourselves unhappy. Only a tiny minority among classical sociologists saw emotions as constitutive of the individual and the social order. They argued that emotions do “good works”—they help individuals to develop “social” selves that co-operate in creating and sustaining a “good” society. Also in contrast to those who saw social order as blocking negative emotions, more recently several theorists have argued that (the hierarchical) social order cannot *but* produce negative emotional outcomes. In all these ways, this text thus shows that the question of order has been, and remains, also about emotions.

## Extreme Feelings at the Extremes – Unruly Times and Territories, System Breakdown, Disintegration

Let me start with a couple of rather well known, and therefore briefly presented examples. In Max Weber's reflections on charisma and in particular on the prophets, we find the first association between the breakdown of a social order and negative emotions (Flam 2002, 57–9). He proposed that when the law and rules break down and people find themselves in the situation of distress, they turn very emotional—desperate in fact, which makes them susceptible to various contenders for charismatic power. These, be it prophets, saviors, knights or political leaders, are all extremely emotional. Weber was impressed by the furious anger of prophets, and not only by their rationalizing reforms (Barbalet 2000), such as introducing taxes or bureaucracy. The feeling and thinking of the charismatic leaders transcends the realm of routine and everyday rules. Nothing short of intense *love* and devotion binds the followers to the charismatic leaders. The masses bow out of deference and *admiration* before their wisdom and fury. However, the leaders aspiring and wishing to consolidate their charismatic rule have repeatedly to prove themselves to their followers and to the masses. Should they fail, the deference and admiration of the masses turns into *hate*—the leaders risk being chased away. Since the breakdown is unique, it generates exceedingly strongly felt emotions: *despair*, *love*, *admiration* and *hate*. Very similar to that of Weber's, is Hannah Arendt's main thesis in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1973). In it she argues that a system breakdown frees the feelings of masses, turning them both desperate and “millennial,” making it possible for the new—totalitarian—leaders to harness them to their goals. Writing about concrete historical cases, Arendt is specific about the elements of the breakdown. She refers to the failure of democratic institutions (political parties, parliament) and the Church to provide economic stability and orientation, in addition to the disintegration of the social classes that cease to be capable of capturing and regulating the lives of their members. In both Weber's and Arendt's analysis of the breakdown the deep *despair* of the masses, their own millennial and the leaders' transcendental aspirations and emotions come together to build the new social and political order.

Norbert Elias, quite explicitly, proposed that an orderly/ordinary nation-state constitutes a main prerequisite of civilized, mannerly conduct and everyday, routine emotions. He argued (Elias 1978, 134–42; Bartels

1995; Wouters 1998) that what he called the civilizing process did away with the original—natural, raw, extreme—*instincts* and *affects* which initially dictated the terms of human interaction. In dealing with each other and in competing for scarce goods, human beings resorted to aggression and violence. In the course of the civilizing process, a few centralizing (state) powers/rulers emerged in Western Europe from among thousands of competing political units. The central ruler became a monopolistic (more, rather than less legitimate) wielder of violence. Within pacified territories ruled by such violence-monopolizing rulers, it became both possible and necessary for the courtiers—dependent on the ruler for their access to, and for their positioning in the polite society—to compete for the royal attention and/or privileges. This was achieved through relying on peaceful means—good manners—rather than, as was the case earlier, through taking up of arms. It is to this constellation that Elias dated back the assertion and consolidation of the first strong, uniform rules constraining and regulating bodily and *emotional expression*. What started as a set of external controls in the form of monitoring, prohibitions and negative sanctions became internalized in the course of the civilizing process to constitute the pillar of individual self-control—the more or less conscious ability of individuals to monitor, suppress and regulate their own instincts and affect. The internalization process as such was predicated upon individuals' new ability to feel (i) *shame* [*Scham*] about one's own transgressions of the ever more sophisticated manners and (ii) painful *embarrassment* [*Peinlichkeit*] when witnessing the transgressions of the others.

The first key insight of Elias then is that it takes a complex, highly contingent constellation of forces to create a civilized society. At the core of this constellation stands a pacified territory ruled and administered by a centralized power that possesses a legitimate monopoly on the use of means of violence, a central administration, and a standing army. The second key insight is that inhabitants of this territory are tied to each other by the mutual dependence and asymmetries of power that compel them to follow the regulatory rules of conduct imposed from above. They accept these rules for *fear* of otherwise losing out in the ongoing competition for economic resources, status and power, but also because, in the meantime, the *others' embarrassment has turned into their shame and vice versa*.

These two insights imply the conditions under which the “civilized” manners lose their hold on the members of the polite society. By the same token they also suggest the conditions under which the fear of losing in the

competition, and the fear of feeling shame and embarrassment, will lose their edge, and with it their capacity to restrain and regulate conduct. Specifically, these emotions lose their grip over the individuals when the central power's monopoly on violence and its control over administration diminish, and/or when the chains of mutual dependence among and power relations between people weaken. Elias envisioned not only the civilization process, but also occasional regression periods (see Elias 1994). In those, shame and embarrassment recede and lose their status as instruments of self- and other-control. Un-civilized aggressive, predatory instincts and primitive affects, such as *frustration*, *aggression*, *envy* or *hostility* re-emerge. Violence in dealing with each other re-surfaces.

Surprisingly, even Erving Goffman, in addressing the role of the state and its political system, conveyed a similar message: the state guarantees social order, this social order sustains our bodily and acting autonomy, thus keeping our negative emotions at bay. In his 1983 Presidential Address, Goffman (1983, 6) stressed that

“[t]he modern nation state, almost as a means of defining itself into existence, claims final authority for the control of hazard and threat to life, limb, and property throughout its territorial jurisdiction. Always in theory, and often in practice, the state provides stand-by arrangements for stepping in when local mechanisms of social control fail to keep break-downs of interaction order within certain limits. [...] To be sure, the interaction order prevailing even in the most public places is not a creation of the apparatus of the state. Certainly most of this order comes into being and is sustained from below, as it were [...] Nonetheless the state has effectively established legitimacy and priority here, monopolizing the use of heavy arms and militarily disciplined cadres as an ultimate sanction.”

Much earlier, in his *Asylums*, Goffman referred explicitly to macro-level, in part political, conditions or context prerequisites that have to be in place before individuals can slide into their everyday social roles (Goffman 1991, 13–72). Among these we find: (i) peaceful, bourgeois-democratic societies with their basic citizen rights; (ii) respect for the “private sphere;” and (iii) segmented social controls which tend towards maximum on the “front stage” and tend towards nil on the “backstage.” Goffman indicated that a free political order is a precondition for the emergence and reproduction of the mundane social order that we see as self-explanatory. It is, in fact, the freedom from oppression and our status as free citizens in a free country that allows us to take it for granted that (a) our bodies, which are in fact extremely “vulnerable to physical assault, sexual molestation, kid-



napping, robbery and obstruction of movement” (Goffman 1983, 4, 17, 25, 27, 33, 35, 37) will neither become subject to (criminal or disciplinary) assault, nor dirtied, made unpresentable or inexpressive of our social status—so that we can make moral claims to the trust, respect and attention of others; (b) we will stay in control of the autobiographical stuff/props used for presentations of our selves in everyday life; (c) we will pattern the flow and rhythm of the non-working part of the day (relying on our rights and individual discretion), including controlling the timing, duration and style of the strenuous public encounters and of the withdrawal back into the “private sphere,” where no authority or public are present; (d) we will use “private sphere” and segmentation of social controls to regenerate (in private or the backstage) our overall capacity to play official/public roles, etc.

These and similar prerequisites of everyday action are intimately interwoven with basic citizen rights and thus by implication constitute macro-level preconditions for routine self-presentations, whose further micro-level prerequisites will be discussed later. It is only when the macro-level prerequisites are present that Goffman’s tacit acknowledgment and accreditation conspiracy can develop, making us all co-operate mannerly in sustaining the basic put-on-acts of our interaction partners. Only when these prerequisites are in place, can demeanor and deference be reciprocated, and *deep, paralyzing embarrassment* and/or *anxiety* be prevented, which surfaces when the desired role-performance cannot be carried out (see also Goffman 1967, 5–12, 22–3).

In *Asylums* Goffman (1991) argued at great length, providing very many examples, that a disciplinary order, such as we find in coercive-punitive social settings of prisons, coercion camps, mental asylums, etc., undermines the individual’s capacity to engage in simple everyday playacting. These settings abolish not only our civic rights and deprive us of our autonomy. Importantly, they cause, at least initially and for some on a long-term basis, the inability to keep back the feelings of *utter helplessness, despair, extreme irritation, frustration, shame or anger* which necessarily emerge when the individual cannot assert his/her control over either the situation or their own self-presentation. Although Goffman’s view on the role of emotions in social interactions is much more complex than I have sketched so far, this summary suffices for now. I will return to other elements of his theorizing later on.