

# Historians Take Note: Motivation = Emotion

*Ramsay MacMullen*

Whether we act as we do at the urging of our thinking mind or of our feelings is something we don't ordinarily see in simple terms. The two alternatives are better thought of as opposing poles on a scale. Action at different moments will be better explained, but not completely explained, by the one or by the other. Overall, or in a given week, it wouldn't be easy to say which had most controlled our behavior. That is how the layman thinks, anyway.

Not so, the learned. Over the course of the last century, they generally ignored the one: the pole of feelings. When the historian Marc Bloch in the early 1940s spoke out in protest, it sounded as if his life had been lived till then, unwillingly, in a second Age of Reason; as if the whole field of human action which is history had been pervaded by an assumption which he denied, and which he saw most aggressively and authoritatively expressed in that one part called economic history. Nor was there any great change to be seen after his death, in the second half of the century. 'To read certain history books,' he wrote, 'one might suppose humanity to be made up solely of logicians' intentions, books for which the motives of action have nothing at all obscure about them.' In just this belief lay their grand illusion 'which is, again, to repeat while exaggerating the mistake so often held up for correction, of that ancient economic theory. Its *homo economicus* was not an empty shadow only for the reason of imagining him to be solely focused on his interests; worse still, the illusion consisted in believing he could form even so clear a conception of these interests.'<sup>1</sup>

Economic history, offering its magic to other sorts of history as an exemplar, indeed had at its center that mythical being and the conjoined assumption 'that *homo economicus* makes his decisions on the basis of considerations of self-interest' – this, 'the model beloved of "pure" economists,' as Daniel Kahneman put it.<sup>2</sup> The model was all rationality, all calculation. Calling it in question earned him a Nobel prize, while other prizes, if less glorious, fell to Robert Shiller for offering a similar challenge from a different point of view, not that of a psychologist but formidably mathematical (*Market Volatility and Irrational Exuberance*).

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So, in that second Age of Reason, the first cracks began to appear in the 1980s and 1990s: reminders that we are not, at least in our economic behavior (which is indeed so much of our lives), purely rational. We are rather prey to fads and fashions, to the idiocies of the herd instinct. We think in crowds.

True; but the fact has nothing very surprising about it for the layman; nor does it discover our irrationality so much as our merely imperfect reasoning. We can be shown to be foolishly mistaken but not totally capricious. We respond to the impressions we form from each other at the urging of social impulses and consequential excesses of spirit. Which is not to say, altogether without thought. It is enough to recall the California Gold Rush to see how the herd instinct once operated upon *homo economicus* in a fashion or fad reasonably rational; that is to say, there really was gold out there, and many won it, and the report of their winnings produced an exuberance which had some sense to it, however giddy it was as well.

But received truths of market-theory loom so enormous over the field, what seems a brave advance to the insiders, well worthy of a prize, may be judged very differently by others on the outside. As Kahneman put it on the occasion cited, 'You need to have studied economics for many years before you'd be surprised by my research.'

And it is easy to understand, too, the resistance offered by received truth and its defenders. The challengers, in taking account of fads and fashions at least as explanatory postulates, want to introduce causal factors which are not subject to quantifiable analysis. Such factors are seen as anathema, the enemies of good method. How can anyone think or argue at all scientifically or conclusively without numbers? As Dr Johnson said long ago, 'That is the good of counting. It brings everything to a certainty which before floated in the mind indefinitely.'

Cannot numbers be somehow applied to the examination of fads and fashions? At least their external manifestations, in visible acts, can be measured and turned into figures. Just this, indeed, Marc Bloch and his school of historical interpretation did attempt. In their monographs and their trade-mark journal, the *Annales*, they undertook to examine all varieties of human behavior in numerical terms. Their fondness for graphs and percentages provoked some gentle ridicule;<sup>3</sup> but they persisted in it then and now. They deal with things like sexual morality or piety through reckoning up all births out of wedlock or memorial masses funded in people's wills; and so forth, for similar topics generally left to the social sciences. The findings inevitably remain very much on the surface of things.

A deeper, truer understanding resisted by the economic Establishment might have been sought in psychology. Its own received truths, like those in most areas of modern research, have been laid out in encyclopedias, updated from time to time. In one such (1998), consider the essay devoted to decision-making, in which there is no allowance at all, in all 45,000 words, for caprice or feelings of any sort; rather, a firm adherence to the 'utility principle', that is, pure rationality, in explaining economic affairs. But this essay is followed in the same gigantic volume by another titled 'Emotions', by quite a different authority. He leads off with the defiant statement, 'This is the first time', among the many editions thus far, that 'a chapter on emotions appears in the *Handbook of Social Psychology*'; and he goes on, 'emotions are of prime importance'. So, signs of another crack in the present Age of Reason.

In the area of history itself, observers may notice a marked rise of interest in emotions considered diachronically and as objects of study, through 'emotionology' (the word proposed in the mid-1980s). From works of a generation ago or more, on *accidie* and melancholy, the focus had moved on to marriage and love with a much admired book by Lawrence Stone (1977); to the once-general enjoyment of sensibility and horror, tears and shudders, in literature and in common behavior; more recently, to shame, anger, or disgust. The shaping or controlling of feelings of various sorts, or of all sorts, at different times by different societies, has been recently studied, too. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* (February 21, 2003) surveyed the whole area through an eccentric but indicative selection of studies. Many more could be added from beyond the Anglophone academy.<sup>4</sup>

A revolution? The strictly cognitive, logical approach to strictly cognitive and logical beings (whether or not the layman is inclined to call these beings, human) has indeed been challenged. In all their three disciplines, economists, psychologists, and historians have done so, and have with more or less triumph called attention to the novelty of their work in the last decade or so. There was indeed, as there still remains, much to be done.

Progress has been made through breaching the boundaries of disciplines, though with certain inherent difficulties. Psychologists don't naturally think like historians; are not likely to have the slightest interest in anything that happened yesterday, necessarily beyond the control of replication. Their laboratory experiments can show that people (the inevitable students in a survey course) may write down accounts of a moment filled with strong emotions, and designate which emotions; and on a scale of one to twenty they may rate the strength of these; and other people may read the account and by empathy identify and feel those feelings and rate their strength in turn; and the two outcomes may then be compared, and will match quite closely. Surely this has something to say about what historians commonly do. But no-one from the laboratory has run to tell them; nor do the historians reach out for such help. I return to the point in a moment.

As to economists thinking as historians – that is, trying to understand market trends, which are of course events of the sort that historians have traditionally concerned themselves with – they demonstrate thus far no curiosity about those irrational fads and fashions and caprices in the past which they are beginning to take seriously in the present. They do go so far as to see that these arise out of moods or conditions of readiness for action of one sort or another, venturesome or the reverse; and this perception and its defense they owe to psychology; but they have not extended their examination to the origin, operation, or *force* of moods (and to *force*, also, I return in a moment).

All sorts of well-controlled experiments in laboratory conditions have relevance to both economics and history. An instance from our new millennium is the report by George Loewenstein, to which Robert Shiller has drawn attention. Loewenstein extends the description and analysis of the irrational in decision-making.<sup>5</sup> In deliberating about a choice, we wonder how it would feel? Affect is there, in the midst of our thinking; it helps to explain market behavior. But the finding arises out of earlier work of other researchers of a much broader application, showing cognition and emotion to be generally intertwined in our minds, not opposing poles of the

whole range of mental activity. Psychologists and neurologists have observed how a given perception is received and responded to, to avoid or to attack or whatever else we may do; is marked at the instant with the corresponding sign or tag which is affective – of disgust, fear, happiness, concupiscence, curiosity, or nurturing along with the familiar bodily sensations attending each – and is so stored in memory; so that the whole cluster of experience which we perceive as an emotion and a plan of action together is instantly retrievable under that sign, and similar clusters with it. The way our memory works allows for the speed of response that may be necessary. True, a great deal of problem-solving mental activity at the level of detail may go on in our heads with no emotion that we are conscious of; but what drives it all and leads to action is of a different, richly colored quality – that is, richly emotional. Consensus on these matters is reflected in, for example, the study referred to above at note 3.

And from these teachings historians even more than economists may well profit. A sort of license or authority is given to those studying some individual, in biography, to consider affective factors in operation; and in contrast it would be easy to instance this or that unsatisfactory 'life' in which the person described is followed only from one calculation to another; never feels but only reasons; 'never comes to life', as the reader will say.

As to the study of groups of people, whole societies, even nations, this is of course another matter. Marc Bloch remarks on the emotionalism of the medieval world where 'attacks of despair or rage, wild outbursts, and sudden changes of heart present historians with a real challenge, inclined as they are by instinct to reconstruct the past along lines of rationality; ponderable elements in history though such phenomena always are, certainly, yet on the course of political events in feudal Europe they had an effect which should not be passed over in silence, out of some false sense of shame'.<sup>6</sup>

The passage draws attention to what others among his fellow historians will still confess to today, 'shame', as Bloch puts it, meaning the expectation of disapproval, scorn, rejection at the hands of their peers, for the crime of taking emotions seriously; shame that must be felt in any mode of interpretation less than scientific, which is to say, less than quantifying. The overthrow of the Age of Reason is not yet!

Nor can it go far unless emotionology, the study of fashions in feelings and social constructs of one sort or another, takes account of consequences in behavior that may be called political. Political change is after all what the layman thinks of as history, and Bloch was quite right to indicate the centrality of that aspect of the past – for all his devotion, and the devotion of his school, to mentalities. Without *force* of feeling there is no action; without action, no change; without change, in at least the traditional and layman's sense of the term, there is no history.

Of force, different emotions by their nature have more or less; and the less tail off into moods or more or less passive states of mind such as depression or contentment, lacking force entirely. Differences can be imagined as lying along a bipolar scale, the extent of which can be calibrated like the familiar Richter scale for earthquakes, arbitrarily but not indefensibly. So psychology here too has a teaching of importance for historians.

We may say, ruminating happily on the start of the day and its croissant and

strong coffee, that we 'love' breakfast; and a minute later, as the conversation shifts, that we 'love' our country. The latter but not the former love might lead us to do something. It motivates. Marc Bloch in his last work did at points insist on the operation of broadly shared impulses of 'the heart', of 'devotion' to 'la patrie', of the ability 'to thrill' to the national past and its grandest chapters, above all those of the monarchy and the Republic. In that sense 'there are', he wrote, 'two kinds of Frenchmen who will never understand France's history: those who will not thrill at the recall of the rites of Rheims, and those who read without emotion an account of the Festival of Federation'.<sup>7</sup>

He himself was not of these two kinds. So in the First World War he was wounded and decorated, and chose to continue in the post-war reserves, and to come forward for service in the next war, being then well into his 50s; and after his country's strange defeat, he chose again to enlist in a war beneath the war, in which he met his death. The flow of decision-making which led to action at these various junctures was all obedient to his heart. In and by him, so far as that little thing, that thing called an individual, can make history, history was made by emotions that had force.

Once this is said, the question to be put to historians is obvious: how can force be measured and action in consequence explained?

The answer has been given, above: there are experiments to show the ability of one person to divine the feelings of another from written accounts, or better still, from face-to-face encounters. We can achieve, even across a gulf of time or customs, 'psychological closeness, a sort of transcultural identification with our subjects'. The words are those of Clifford Geertz invoking the operation of empathy, that stronger cousin of sympathy.<sup>8</sup> Empathy works. And we need to make use of it; for without it – without it, there can be no understanding of others, no insight. The fact is long familiar in philosophy, therefore in German, as Geertz continues: 'What happens to *Verstehen* when *Einfühlen* disappears?'

In the first Age of Reason, according to one set of arguments, truth in *Einfühlung* was denied; in the second Age, denied by another set. The learned teacher, the academician, was sure – but no more than the layman was and is sure – that the academician is an ass. For, in the ordinary conduct of our quite ordinary lives, we are all conscious of reading each other by this power of ours, constantly. Only recently has psychology come to the aid of common sense, with findings of empathy in the behavior of the tiniest infants, blending into the same behavior in small children of an age to speak and explain what is going on in their minds; and so to confirm in turn the self-reporting by adults on which psychologists build so much of their science. To deny ourselves the use of this power of understanding, if we are historians, would be asinine.

That it is in fact used by historians, not obedient to the present Age of Reason, can be shown in a million good history books, of which Thucydides wrote one. None better, perhaps. And here follows a passage from that author (7.69.2) where he conveys the feel of a moment of great historical significance: the impending defeat of the Athenians in Sicily under their commander Nicias:

Nicias, driven almost out of his mind by the situation, and seeing the real dangers and their imminence and how short a time before the setting out, suffered the torments usual in major engagements. Everything to be done by his forces was, he thought, still not ready; everything to be said had still not been said enough. Once again he called on each trireme captain singly, addressing them by their fathers' name, their given name and tribe, that they should live up to whatever good fame each had won, and not bring to naught ancestral virtues so marked in their forebears. He reminded them of their fatherland, the freest ever, and of the unconstrained choices it afforded in one's daily life; he added all those things that men in such situations as those present will say, oblivious of what might be trite and usual, in similar terms, for every cause: appeals to wives, children, and ancestral gods, which men will shout out, in the consternation they feel, thinking them of some use.<sup>9</sup>

How did the author know the commander was 'driven almost out of his mind'? Is Thucydides' conjecture real history? The layman has no difficulty with an answer to that question: any intelligent contemporary with the needed powers of empathy (which many in fact would have) would feel no hesitation in declaring a knowledge of Nicias, an *Einfühlung* even for the inner man, just as Thucydides did not hesitate to do. Nor should we hesitate today. No problem! Let it be even in the language of philosophy, *kein Problem!* Only the second Age of Reason stands in our way; and it is on the way out. With it may disappear, in time at least, the more learned disposition to admire Thucydides only for his complete, his pervasive and imagined, rationality, which historians must imitate.

In a larger demonstration, it would be easy to show how willingly intuitive this particular writer was. His ancient readers recognized this power or proclivity in him, as did some readers of the last generation, against the consensus of the Age of Reason which could see only the rationalist. Gradually the dawn breaks.

And it is not only in moments of high drama that Thucydides acknowledges the play of emotions in the past. He is consistent in distinguishing between those that impel men to step outside of themselves, outside the rut of their daily lives, to do those things that deserve the historians' interest: things that account for change. Naturally, in a book about a war involving hundreds of states and several distinct phases, such changes were generally (but not solely) from peace to war. Anger and its variants, outrage and indignation and the desire for revenge, are the urges to which he assigns the origins of actions that count, at dozens of junctures; and ancient historians in general did so, too.<sup>10</sup> Which is not to deny that subsequent action which obeys and effectuates major choices may be calculating: in modern market-analytical terms, people count the costs (and notice, 'count', quantify).

Acknowledgement of the role of feelings in making history, without ignoring calculation, was common sense among those ancient writers. So, sometimes, for *le grand public* and out of sight of the learned, history has been and always will be written. But our own age would do well to free it from the academic insistence on reason.

Ramsay MacMullen  
*Dunham Professor of History, Emeritus, Yale University*

## Notes

1. The posthumous *Apologie pour l'histoire, ou, Métier d'historien*, Paris, 1949, p. 101 .
2. Kahneman, quoted in *The Jerusalem Report* of 10 February 2003.
3. Jack Hexter in the *Journal of Modern History*, 44, 1972.
4. Works of the 1990s by Michael Bernsen, Werner Röcke, Frédéric Chauvaud . . .
5. *Psychological Bulletin*, 127, 2001.
6. *La société féodale; la formation des liens de dépendance*, 1939 [1949], p. 118.
7. Marc Bloch, *L'étrange défaite. Témoignage écrit en 1940*, 1957, p. 210.
8. C. Geertz, "'From the native's point of view". On the nature of anthropological understanding', *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 28, 1974, 28.
9. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*.
10. In the first chapter of my *Feelings in History, Ancient and Modern* (Fr. edn, Ramsay MacMullen, *Les sentiments dans l'histoire ancienne et moderne*), 2003, I supply the findings for this and for the rest of my essay here.