

Scholars Between Laughter and Tears

About: Françoise Waquet, *Une histoire émotionnelle du savoir, XVII^e-XXI^e*, CNRS Éditions

by Volny Fages

Scholars are not just thinking machines. They laugh; they are anxious, angry, or afraid; they become friends with their colleagues. Researchers experience many emotions but these are mainly ignored, as though they had nothing to do with the process that produces knowledge.

As the academic world turns ever more towards the quantification (and evaluation) of the work produced by researchers, reducing it to indices, ratings, number of publications, and rankings, the human, more sensitive, aspects of their daily lives are sometimes ignored.

Are scholars nothing but ‘thinking machines’ (p. 10) generating texts, data, and experiments? They are supposed to set aside all preconceptions and prejudice, but do they also leave their bodies and their emotions at the door of their research labs or libraries? If, as they work, scientists are also living beings made up of feelings, passions, joys, and sorrows, does this fact influence how they produce knowledge and the very content of that knowledge?

In her book *Histoire émotionnelle du savoir* [An Emotional History of Knowledge], Françoise Waquet sets out to shed light on these questions by giving researchers back their ‘emotioned identity’ (p. 11) and showing them to be ‘made of flesh and blood’ (p. 10). Running counter to a history of ideas that is too disembodied, her aim is to give scholars back their sensibility and so re-establish the ‘*sensorium*’ (*L’ordre matériel*, p. 163) of scholarly culture.

This project clearly follows on from the author's previous book, published in 2015 and devoted to *L'ordre matériel du savoir* [The Material Order of Knowledge]. It studied the practical aspects of the work produced by scholars, the materiality of their daily lives, and the range of tools they design and use. In *Histoire émotionnelle*, we see F. Waquet once again paying attention to the banal and the insignificant, studying things that could be considered unworthy of interest. In this respect, the book is remarkable. Its approach contributes to a broader historiographical trend seeking to offer new narratives by reversing or displacing the subjects considered worthy of historical analysis.¹

Inventory and taxonomy

In order to reread the history of science through the lens of scholars' emotions, F. Waquet draws primarily on printed sources composed mainly of their autobiographies, excerpts from inaugural lectures, university ceremonies, etc. A wealth of 'ego-documents' (p. 15) that she assembles and analyses through an 'extensive reading of the texts' (p. 16) in order to extract the emotions that they might contain. The range of the author's reading is enormous and she draws on an impressive array of primary sources.²

In the first two chapters of the book, she provides an inventory of scholarly emotions, compiling and classifying them. She broaches *homo academicus* as a sensitive being via numerous examples dating essentially from the 1930s to today, approached from different vantage points. The crucial moments in academic careers, such as applications for chairs, generate a range of emotions, joyous or sorrowful; the relationships built, within scholarly communities, with colleagues, or with mentors, also generate positive and negative affects that are sometimes violent.

In the course of the various chapters, the reader is taken through the different items in this inventory, the different zones of this 'emotional ecology' (p. 22). We wander through the 'emotional spaces' of scholarly work, from libraries to research labs, from the field to the office. Scholars express themselves and write about their contentment or, more often, their discontent or suffering in these spaces. They also give affective meaning to everyday 'objects,' the vagaries of which also provide occasions for expressions of emotion. From printed books to laptop computers, from laboratory notebooks to ethnologists' field notes, the everyday relationships between scholars and the affective objects surrounding them are made up of love, desire, possession, fear, frustration, and anger.

¹ While F. Waquet does not herself claim this affiliation, her work can be related to other studies in the cultural

² It is, however, extremely regrettable that the 'selective bibliography' at the end of the book only gives a very partial reflection of all the primary sources used.

Finally, the book also classifies emotions according to their place in the different stages of researchers' 'life-profession: for example, the intellectual encounters of their youth, their choice of field and topic of research, the economy of their daily work, and, more specifically, the writing and publishing of a book, as well as its reception.

As mentioned above, the examples used to trace this outline are mainly drawn from the recent past. Chapter 6, however, sets out to take the different categories of this classification and apply them to examples from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with the idea that this approach allows for 'a useful comparison' (p. 246). The chapter goes through examples of mentor/disciple relationships, places of work, objects laden with emotions, and the trials and tribulations of authorship, but this time in the faraway past.

Piquant examples

It is possible that the book's main value lies in the examples it provides. While most of them have already been published, they nevertheless remain little known. Among other cases, F. Waquet makes recurrent use of the (published) correspondence between historians Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch. As we follow their exchanges, we are plunged into Marc Bloch's exasperation, concern, and weariness as he (unsuccessfully) applies to the Collège de France in 1928 and is forced to go on a tour of 'visits', each more embarrassing than the last, to professors likely to vote for him (chap. 1). We tremble with fear alongside him in 1940 at the thought that his personal book collection might be taken from him and dispersed. We likewise curse in unison with Lucien Febvre in 1935 as he co-authors his book *Le Rhin* with a somewhat disengaged Albert Demongéons.

In Chapter 6, the comparison with the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries offers opportunities for amused delights as we notice similarities with twentieth-century criticisms of libraries when it comes to the difficulty of accessing books. The complaints sparked by the initial problems when France's National Library moved in 1998 (p. 76) echo nicely the 'catalogue of complaints and indignation' (p. 259) from eighteenth-century scholars faced with the considerable obstacles that Italian libraries created for their visitors. In the Vatican Library, for example, consulting a book was no mean feat. It entailed locating the guard entrusted with the keys to a cabinet which itself contained other keys, including that of the catalogue cabinet. Then the classification mark of the desired manuscript had to be found, before going on to locate said manuscript in unmarked cabinets locked by two further keys. Enough to arouse a certain 'bibliophilic rage' (p. 260).

Erasing social difference, ignoring historicity

F. Waquet's choice to prioritise the identification of different types of expressions of emotion among scholars raises a certain number of problems and is based on certain presuppositions that would have warranted explanation.

It seems to me that the emotional history of knowledge offered here is somewhat lacking in historicity. The temporal dimension to the analysis is principally reduced to a block comparison devoid of chronological nuance, in chapter 6, between a recent period (analysed in chapters 1-5 and borrowing examples indiscriminately from the 1930s to the 1990s) and an older period covering the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, again without distinction. As mentioned above, the parallels between these periods and the consistency of the emotions evoked by the texts are striking. The scholars of the Republic of Letters were also moved in their daily working lives, in their relationships with their colleagues, in their rapport to the objects they used, and when their books were published. No doubt so. But do we not risk falling victim to a teleological optical illusion when we take what could well be no more than discursive analogies as indications of identical natures? And is this illusion not further bolstered by a certain tendency towards psychological essentialism? ('how might things be otherwise?' [p. 320], 'how could things possibly be different?' [p. 288]).

Could words not have changed meaning between the seventeenth and twenty-first centuries? Might the transformation of the ecology of scientific disciplines, particularly through the shift in balance between the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences, not also have altered emotional engagement? And it is not possible that the change in scholars' social standing, especially in the nineteenth century, modified collective representations of scholars' emotions and, therefore, what they could or should admit to feeling?

It is accepted that the history of emotions is complicated, often confronted with partial and mediated sources that are difficult both to interpret and to critique. The book might nevertheless have benefitted from more source analysis. Unpublished archives could have provided further detail to the overall picture, by perhaps looking at less prestigious and more anonymous individuals, moving away from the Collège de France so as better to corroborate the general typology suggested.³

³ The mentor/disciple relationship discussed in chapter 4 offers an example of the difficulties raised by the nature of the sources that underpin the generalisations made by the author. The influence of the mentors essentially broached through testimonies from contemporary researchers who were trained by the stars of their discipline (Claude Lévi-Strauss, Fernand Braudel, Jean-Pierre Vernant, Marcel Mauss, etc.) and who express their admiration, fascination, and amazement retrospectively. This clearly raises the question of source bias and the difficult critical distance that should be maintained from local sources. Are there not (regularly) researchers whose career paths have not in fact crossed those of emblematic, fascinating mentors? Do people only become researchers through some quasi-mystical revelation prompted by an initial encounter, a scholarly epiphany?

Stating the obvious?

Throughout the book, the project is constantly positioned in the vanguard of historiography, as it draws attention to gaps in the traditional literature on science and technology and asserts on a number of occasions that scholars' emotions are 'neglected or hidden' (p. 321). This stance is surprising, at the very least, to researchers working in the history or sociology of science. Whereas the author's bibliography comprises, as I have already mentioned, a remarkable wealth of primary sources, its list of secondary sources contains significant omissions. For example, R.K. Merton's socio-historical work, which, as early as 1942, posited that scientists' moral integrity was no greater than the average and that they were men like any others, thus susceptible to feeling emotion. Another example would be Steven Shapin, author of *The Scientific Life*, the second chapter of which discusses the history of this idea in some detail. And more generally, there is the broad trend that has seen a revived interest in the biography of scholars since the late 1980s and has produced often novel connections between, on the one hand, descriptions of scientific careers and of extremely 'embodied' and 'emotioned' daily lives and research activities, and, on the other, the production of knowledge.⁴

'Scientists are human too'.⁵ This assertion is no doubt not as radical and provocative today as it was in the 1940s and there is certainly reason to question this book's actual contribution to current debates about specialist researchers in the scholarly world. That being said, F. Waquet's book must be credited with a certain political forcefulness. By deconstructing, again and again, the myth of the purely rational scholar entirely devoid of emotion, this book has a role to play in defending those striving to produce knowledge in the face of the cold, quantifying logic of academic management. If 'emotions form part of the everyday working lives' (p. 324) of researchers, then, as the author argues in her conclusion, universities must 'rehumanise' their way of managing their workforce and finally take into account their daily 'suffering' (p. 321).

Françoise Waquet, *Une histoire émotionnelle du savoir, XVII^e-XXI^e*, CNRS Éditions, 2019, 352 p., 25 €.

⁴ Among this rich and diverse bibliography, it is worth mentioning in particular the section on "Biography in the History of Science" in *Isis*, vol. 97, n° 2, 2006, p. 302-329; T. Söderqvist (ed.), *The History and Poetics of Scientific Biography*, Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing, 2007; C. Lawrence and S. Shapin (eds), *Science Incarnate*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1998; Anne Collinot, "Entre vie et œuvre scientifique : le chaînon manquant," *Critique*, n°781-782, vol. 6-7, 2012, p. 576-587.

⁵ Shapin 2008, *op. cit.* p. 47.

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