

H-France Forum

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Thomas Dodman, *What Nostalgia Was: War, Empire, and the Time of a Deadly Emotion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. xi + 275 pp. Notes, archival sources and index. \$35 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-226-49294-0.

Response by Thomas Dodman, Columbia University

I wish to thank the editors of H-France for organizing a forum on *What Nostalgia Was* and Masha Belenky in particular for assembling an interdisciplinary panel of distinguished reviewers. It is a privilege to have one's work assessed by colleagues who have many more books under their belt and thus know what it takes. Peter Stearns brings to bear his extensive engagement with the history of emotions; Susan Foley hers with gender in modern France; and Nicholas White his with literary and historical approaches to the study of war. That they should, from these different standpoints, have each found the book enjoyable, worthy of generous consideration and constructive critique, is immensely gratifying. Their thoughtful comments give me the opportunity to revisit some of the arguments and reflect—a little more liberally than in a published book—upon some loose ends of a project that started fifteen years ago, before I had any idea that nostalgia wasn't what it used to be...

As the three reviewers note, this is and isn't a history of an emotion. While the book is, of course, largely focused on a particular feeling (or at least an object of study that we typically think of as pertaining to the realm of affects), and I cannot deny a certain strategic intent (both historiographical and commercial) in having the word "emotion" in the title, I am glad that the book's wider ambitions come across, illustrating—as adequately as it may be—what the study of emotional life *can do* for our understanding of the past more in general. Not a history of an emotion *per se*, then; but history that does not leave emotions out. In this respect, I hope and think that, in spite of deep-seated misgivings, we are, as a profession, approaching a more propitious moment for integrating *le sensible* in all its shapes and forms in our protocols of historical research. For sure, this remains an uphill battle. But, writing in 2018, in an age as global and cosmopolitan as it is local and identitarian, it seems to me that there are pressing political as much as historiographical reasons to heed the passions of the past.

At a first level of analysis, the book considers clinical nostalgia as an example of what Ian Hacking has called a "transient mental illness," that is a psychological syndrome that appeared at a specific moment in time, established itself as a recognized diagnosis, but was eventually discredited and superseded by other disorders.[1] In the case of nostalgia, we have a clear moment of inception—Johannes Hofer's 1688 medical thesis that coins the neologism and provides its first clinical description—and a slow fizzling out that spans much of the nineteenth century. What we also have, and what makes this a particularly interesting case in my opinion, is an unexpected twist at the end: nostalgia doesn't simply disappear once invalidated as a medical category; instead, it is depathologized and internalized as a relatively benign emotion, a perfectly normal and seemingly universal feature of human nature. As Peter Stearns notes, historians typically find it easier to chart the emergence of a phenomenon than they do its disappearance. As Susan Foley further observes, and as I readily concede, this book is, alas, no exception in this regard. What I tried to show was

that classical ways of approaching this question offer only partial answers, ones that aren't wrong *per se*, but that can only explain part of what is going on. Thus, an "internalist" medical explanation can show how nostalgia was replaced by neurasthenia, subsumed under theories of climatic determinism and racial degeneration, or simply invalidated by paradigmatic shifts such as bacteriology or the "discovery" of psychological trauma. But what it can't explain is why the category itself didn't disappear like so many other meteoric diagnoses have (think of "lipemia" for example). Likewise, a "contextualist" cultural explanation can point either to suggestive notions of rupture (temporal, epistemic, technological etc.) or to an undeniable phenomenon of popularization whereby nostalgia became a general cultural category lost to precise scientific usage. But it has difficulty accounting for the protracted nature of this process or why the very meaning of the category changed so dramatically, from spatial to temporal, pathogenic to benign, authentic to ersatz. A useful contrast here is with the notion of trauma, which has moved from medical discourse to become a "floating signifier," but without shedding its original meaning.

In the book I tried to take these approaches into account and do them justice—although perhaps not sufficiently (I can certainly see how a medical historian would want more of the internalist explanation and a literary scholar much more on the cultural appropriation of nostalgia in the age of romanticism). But what I was really interested in was exploring another piece of the puzzle, one that moves the explanation both towards the more concrete and the more abstract. More concrete, because it involves thinking of what I call the "practices of nostalgia," namely the many different semiotic actions that are implicated in the experiencing, defining, and grappling with the condition from the perspective of the sufferers, doctors, observers, state institutions etc. In this respect, the analysis is pitched at a more sociological level and adopts an ethnographic approach intent on capturing the conditions of possibility for many people to experience nostalgia (mostly "working class" people, although class doesn't really matter much here -- what does matter is that they work under some form of constraint). More abstract, because I seek to fold this empirical research into a theory of practice that can account for how forms of social action have a tendency to congeal into anonymous structures that then confront individuals as given or natural—a tendency that I take to be particularly pronounced in, if not quite specific to, the capitalist epoch, for reasons that ultimately have to do with the double-sided nature of the commodity form. It is this dynamic and open-ended congealing of practices into structures that, in turn, orient new practices that can, I believe, get us closer to explaining why nostalgia didn't just disappear when invalidated as a medical category, but rather was folded into our "normal" emotional life and became such a distinctive feature of the modern epoch. For such an explanation can account for how soldiers who once almost died of nostalgia could then become veterans who sought solace in nostalgic remembrance of days under arms. Or how colonial settlers who suffered from nostalgia when confronted with a foreign form of modern anomie would eventually thrive on the deliberate nostalgia exuded by replica "authentic" French villages built in the colonies by joint-stock companies floated on the Paris stock market. An explanation that can both elucidate how a psychiatric condition has become a psychological prop and how multinational financial institutions can market themselves as "the world's local bank." In short, an account that takes nostalgia, in its successive manifestations, to be a quintessentially modern phenomenon—not just a reaction to modernity's estranging tendencies, but a form of subjectivity that speaks *both* to the ruptures *and* continuities that define capitalist modernity.

Whatever the merits of this explanation for why clinical nostalgia disappeared only to become a benign emotion—and I readily concede that not everyone will be swayed by the theoretical move—it seems to me as if this kind of approach does have value in what it allows us to see about modernity from the vantage point of emotional life. To my mind, the first and main payoff is an attentiveness to individuals and to social relations, to the disruptions and coping mechanisms that mediated the social transformations of modernity. While I fully embrace the professions’ (re)turn to political economy and impetus to broaden our scales of analysis to encompass global and deep histories, I worry about this coming at the cost of sentient human beings, who easily become mere data points caught up in the gales of history (and our *péché mignon* for positivistic empiricism). Like politics, all history is local, and is especially *felt* locally. Great transformations are rarely grasped as such; they register in people’s lives as a succession of micro transformations. Studying the birth pangs of the modern world from the particular vantage point of clinical nostalgia is of course a highly reductive move in many ways. Yet it does allow us to grasp these macro transformations in new ways, as the reviewers note: with regard to questions of periodization; changing forms of masculinity and gender roles; emotional investment in family relations; or the mutual constitution of local, national, imperial and diasporic forms of territorial identification. Most of all (and much to my own initial surprise), it forces us to reconsider the central role of war and the army in the formation of modern forms of social relations. In the book I tried to do so from two angles in particular: first, by viewing modern soldiering as a particular form of (doubly free) alienated labor, half way (both conceptually and historically) between slavery and industrial wage-labor, and exploiting the abundance of medical interest in soldiers (for the purely instrumental reason that soldiers’ bodies are worth more to institutions than workers’ let alone slaves’) to get at some medicalized refractions of the experience of alienation. And, second, by exploring what the history of war neuroses looks like before the advent of psychological trauma in the late nineteenth century, paying attention to both historical specificity (it doesn’t make sense to speak of PTSD before 1860 because the very notion of aftereffect simply isn’t there, conceptually) and surprising instances of continuity that unsettle our historian’s sixth sense -- for example, a certain reappearance of similar emotional tropes in soldiering across the ages.

Ultimately, I think it is possible to use emotions in a broad sense to “bore into” much larger objects of study and, in a 360° deep contextualizing move akin to that of micro-history, rekindle that old *Annales* dream of an *histoire totale*. Not an *histoire totalisante*, but one that refuses to parse segments of historical experience and treat them in isolation, recognizing instead the interconnectedness of each, and, inevitably, the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach. *What Nostalgia Was* tries to do this by scrutinizing nostalgia from a variety of angles and vantage-points. Inevitably, it also leaves stones unturned. The reviewers each single out some of the book’s main blind spots. Both Susan Foley and Peter Stearns regret that I did not include more civilian examples to strengthen my case—a point that I am all too aware of. The paucity of medical sources for civilians is partly to blame for this, and I eventually had to abandon the idea of a third major site of archival research on nineteenth-century manufacturing laborers alongside the military and colonial ones, and drawing from the Villermé material that did make it into the book. More damaging is the lack of a sustained engagement with women sufferers at a time when nostalgia and hysteria are being heavily gender-coded, and I especially regret not having pursued further the literature on nostalgia among slave populations in the Caribbean (thankfully my Columbia colleague Cristobal Silva will do that in a forthcoming book). As Foley points out, I should certainly have done more with the case of the Communards who were exiled to New Caledonia

and whose nostalgia has already been studied by Alice Bullard [2]. Exploring further these other sites would have helped address another point that Stearns pushes me on: the missing, or at least underdeveloped, comparative dimension to the book. Here too, I plead guilty to not having been able to fully account for why I view nostalgia as both a general phenomenon and a specifically French one. I believe that the reasons I provide for the French specificity—from the army’s unique political culture to the circumstances of French medicine and in particular the medical corps’ professionalizing needs—are sound enough. But they would, no doubt, have benefitted from more sustained cross-examination with other national cases, particularly the British and American ones. More in general, I wish I had been able to give the book a more thoroughly transnational scope, if not quite a global one. Not simply because “*ça fait bien*” these days to do global history, but because there is a real question at stake when it comes to such a Eurocentric-yet-global concept as nostalgia (very similar, in this respect, to trauma). Because of their cultural irreducibility and tendency to travel, emotion concepts are both ideal and elusive sites for an *histoire à parts égales* that would account for exchanges and lack thereof from both sides. The one-sided nature of the story I tell is painfully obvious to me in several instances, nowhere more so than in the chapters on the colonization of Algeria.

Last but not least, I am also very much aware that from the point of view of a literary scholar it must seem as if I give short shrift to the aesthetic qualities of nostalgia and, relatedly, to its political implications. Nicholas White’s generous assessment of the book cannot hide that my limited engagement with literary forms of nostalgia in no way does justice to the topic, and that chapter five, which grapples in passing with romanticism, is a bit of an outlier, as Foley justly remarks. White is, however, spot on in pointing to the question of disciplinarity and to what it does to the kind of scholarship that we produce. When I embarked on this project somewhat reluctantly as a history PhD student interested in revolutions and political economy, I had a very clear idea about what I *did not* want to do (and *could not* do!): neither a close textual reading of literary forms of nostalgia nor a broader cultural history of representations of nostalgia. This was partly due to my historiographical orientations but also because I felt that the latter had been brilliantly done already by Peter Fritzsche and that several literary scholars had already pursued the former better than I possibly could—although curiously enough there isn’t, to my knowledge, a historical study of the aesthetics of nostalgia in French literature comparable to ones available for the German and especially the British case -- something rather odd given the pervasiveness of nostalgic tropes in French literature, as White points out.[3] Instead, my nostalgia was going to be of the no-nonsense medical kind: practical, sociological, and most of all, empirically grounded in archival sources. At one point, I even contemplated purposefully avoiding the word “romanticism” altogether, almost as a provocation. Fifteen years on, I stand by the claim that the archival approach is, *in fine*, what distinguishes the book from other studies of nostalgia. But I have softened my stance as to how this social historical approach connects with an aesthetic engagement with nostalgia and with the different kinds of interpretative reading that White parses out (*et pour cause*: I now teach in a French department...). I must, in fact, sheepishly admit that I had not, until now, read the special issue of *Representations* on “surface reading”. In the book, I went straight to “distant reading,” or at least gestured towards it for what I thought it could show about the slow eclipse of medical nostalgia and passage into common language only by the turn of the twentieth century (in other words: epistemic ruptures “*durent longtemps*”). But I clearly was and remain an unrepentant adept of symptomatic reading, suffice it to point to the many non-medical occurrences of “symptom of” and “symptomatic of” throughout the manuscript. Like Marx’s commodity, nostalgia is by

definition deceptive, which is not to say that its manifest content accessible to a surface reading or phenomenology is any less important; simply that it is one side of the coin, inadequate unto itself. Indeed, I would suggest that attentiveness to emotional life impels historians in particular to sharpen their hermeneutic instincts and not hide behind empirical data, whether of the archival kind or, heaven forbid, the neuroscientific kind (although I haste to add here that psychologists like James Russell and Lisa Feldman Barrett are themselves now suggesting, on the basis of neuroscientific research, that emotions are situated and constructed in a social and habituated way).[4] Ultimately, I could not agree more with White’s plea for interdisciplinary cross-over and collaboration, of which his own work is exemplary. In pondering his review, it has further become apparent to me how important aesthetics are to one last facet of nostalgia that I barely touched upon in the book: its political implications. Political analyses of nostalgia come in all shapes and sizes. Some of the most recent interesting ones have sought to overcome its seemingly inevitable association to conservative politics and instead capture a critical, even transformative potential to nostalgia. [5] I have to say that I am somewhat skeptical of this, mainly because I don’t think that nostalgia represents any sort of “outside” from which to “resist” capital. Rather, if the book shows anything of relevance to today’s political landscape, it is just how fully subsumed and constitutive of capital—understood as a dynamic, dialectical, even unstable social form—nostalgia is. Much has happened around the world in the two years since I finished the book manuscript to remind me of how important the politics of nostalgia remains today. I hope to be able to pick up this and some other loose ends that the reviewers have helpfully pointed out in a revised French edition of *What Nostalgia Was*.

NOTES

[1] Ian Hacking, *Mad Travelers: Reflections on the Reality of Transient Mental Illness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[2] Alice Bullard, “Self-Representation in the Arms of Defeat: Fatal Nostalgia and Surviving Comrades in French New Caledonia, 1871–1880,” *Cultural Anthropology* 12, no. 2 (1997): 179–212.

[3] Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Ann C. Colley, *Nostalgia and Recollection in Victorian Culture* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1998); Nicholas Dames, *Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting and British Fiction, 1810–1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Tamara S. Wagner, *Longing: Narratives of Nostalgia in the British Novel, 1740–1890* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2004); Linda M. Austin, *Nostalgia in Transition, 1780–1917* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007); Simon Bunke, *Heimweh: Studien zur Kultur- und Literaturgeschichte einer tödlichen Krankheit* (Freiburg: Rombach, 2009); and Kevis Goodman, *Pathologies of Motion: Enlightenment Medicine, Romantic Poetics* (forthcoming).

[4] Maria Gendron and Lisa Feldman Barrett, “Emotion Perception as Conceptual Synchrony,” *Emotion Review* 10, no. 2 (2018): 101-110; and, for a more approachable overview, Lisa Feldman Barrett, *How Emotions are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2018).

[5] See, among others, Tobias Becker, “The Meanings of Nostalgia: Genealogy and Critique,” *History and Theory* 57, no. 2 (2018): 234-250; Nadia Atia and Jeremy Davies, “Nostalgia and the Shapes of History,” *Memory Studies* 3, no. 3 (2010): 3-10; and Christian Kloeckner, “Risk and Nostalgia: Fictions of the Financial Crisis,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 60, no. 4 (2015): 463-478.

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