

Emotions in the Social Thought and Political Economy of the Scottish Enlightenment



The project seeks to explore the hitherto under-appreciated role of emotions in the work of thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, particularly that of Adam Smith (1723–1790) and Adam Ferguson (1723–1815), both of whose thought was remarkably prescient. In their theories of social order and change both thinkers treat emotions, (that is, ‘passions’, ‘sentiments’, ‘desires and aversions’) not as epiphenomena, but as independent variables in the emergence, maintenance and progress of human society.

This approach uniquely anticipates the structural functionalism of nineteenth and twentieth century social thought. While neither uses the modern terminology, they are nevertheless both deeply interested in ‘emotional culture’, ‘emotional socialisation processes’ and relationships between social structure and emotion norms in much the same way as are modern sociologists of affect.

Other topics of interest in this project include the role of catharsis in the maintenance of social equilibrium; the emergence and functions of commercial emotions and the changing character of affective relationships under the pressures of modernity.

I explore these and other themes in the work of Smith and Ferguson as well as in that of lesser Scottish Enlightenment figures like Thomas Reid and Francis Hutcheson.

Key Research Questions:

- What forces in the eighteenth century were driving changes in peoples’ affective relationships?
- Why was Adam Smith—a Political Economist—so interested in emotions?’
- Why did Adam Ferguson believe that commercialism undermined affective life?

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performance

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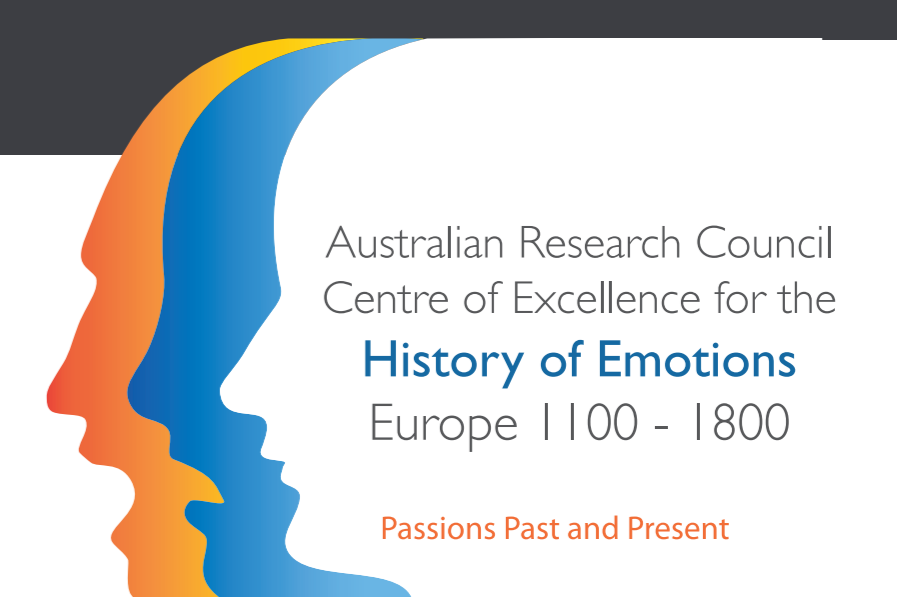
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Passions Past and Present