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Article (Accepted Version)

Langhamer, Claire (2016) An archive of feeling? Mass observation and the mid-century moment. *Insights*, 9 (4). pp. 1-15. ISSN 1756-2074

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An Archive of Feeling? Mass Observation and the Mid-Century Moment

Claire Langhamer

Abstract: This working paper has two objectives: one is methodological and the other is empirical. First it explores the issues at stake in accessing feelings in the past. How do historians 'get at' emotion and what feeling-evidence is available to us? Here I am particularly interested in identifying sources that allow access to the feelings of 'ordinary' people and to the messiness of everyday emotional life. I will focus in particular upon the material generated by the British social investigative organization – Mass Observation – in the middle years of the twentieth century. In the second part of the paper I will demonstrate how a small sample of this Mass Observation material – discursive responses to open ended questionnaires sent to a panel of volunteer writers in May and August 1945 – can be used to enhance our understanding of the British transition from war to peace. Specifically I will use Mass Observation material to illuminate the work that emotion did, and was called upon to do. I will argue that emotion-management was a powerful frame for individual as well as public reconstruction narratives; that individual feeling and experience was valorised within this context; and that an emerging 'right to feel' was an important aspect of a broader post-1945 rights discourse.

I

In August 1945, the British social investigative organisation, Mass Observation, wrote to its national panel of volunteer writers soliciting responses to a number of topical questions. The panellists were asked for their views on the maintenance of wartime controls, on the treatment of Germany and on the newly elected Labour government. They were also asked about their emotional state. 'Describe in detail your own *feelings* and views about the atom bomb, and those of the people you meet,' stated the first question.¹ 'How do you feel about the peace now?' enquired the second.² Those who responded were not unfamiliar with this mode of questioning; the completion of open-ended questionnaires – called Directives – was a key aspect of the panel's engagement with Mass Observation. Two months earlier, for example, emotional well-being had also been foregrounded in the questions they were asked: 'How do you feel now the war is over in Europe, and how does this compare with

how you expected to feel?,' 'What do you think is worrying people most at present?'³ In fact, those who wrote for the organisation across the war years were routinely asked to record their feelings on a wide range of subjects. The framing of these topics traversed and actively blurred the distinction between private and public; the personal and the political; the apparently mundane and the self-consciously extraordinary. 'How do you feel about holidays this year?' (January 1940), 'What are your present feelings about the British Empire?' (February 1942), 'What are your personal feelings about invasion?' (March 1942), 'What are your personal feelings now about death and dying?' (May 1942), 'What are your own general *feelings* and *beliefs* about venereal disease?' (November 1942), 'How do you feel about the French nowadays?' (March 1943), 'What are your general feelings and beliefs about what is going on in India now?' (May 1943), and 'What do you feel about the recent bombing of Germany?' (December 1943) In January 1944 the Mass Observers were even asked to create a subjective mood chart marking 10 for 'maximum cheerfulness' and minus 10 for 'deepest depression.'

Mass Observation's commitment to feelings-based research questions was clearly more than a stylistic tick and extended beyond the immediate wartime context. Although some of its volunteer writers used 'feeling' as a proxy for thought or belief, most were clear that their response to these questions offered an emotional perspective. Emotion was both a research topic and a category of analysis for the organization itself. The relationship between thought, feeling and action lay at the heart of its research practice: in 1949 one publication described this focus rather beautifully as 'the live dynamic whole of feeling and behaviour.' (Mass Observation, 1949, p. 8) The evidence that Mass Observation generated therefore provides mediated access to British people's emotional worlds and helps us to get at what Joe Moran describes as 'the messy, convoluted experience lived by thinking, feeling selves.' (Moran, 2015, p. 161) But the words it generated also reflect wider cultural shifts allowing us to think beyond individual experience, its narration and its interpretation, to get at what Raymond Williams described as 'structures of feeling.' (Williams, 1977, pp. 128-135)

I have two objectives in this working paper: one is methodological; the other is empirical. First, I want to think through the issues at stake in accessing feelings in the past. What evidence of emotion is available to the historian of modern Britain in particular, and what challenges do we face in using it? Here I will pay particular attention to the material collected by Mass Observation in the middle years of the

twentieth century. Second, I want to use this Mass Observation evidence to map some of the work that emotion did in Britain in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War: to apply cultural theorist Sara Ahmed's question – 'What do emotions do?' – to a precise historical context. (Ahmed, 2014, p. 4) Here I am going to focus specifically on 'ordinary' people's feelings about the momentous events of 1945.⁴

II

Historians of emotion contend that feeling is, to a greater or lesser extent, framed by time and place. 'Emotions themselves are extremely plastic' observes the medievalist Barbara Rosenwein, 'it is very hard to maintain, except at an abstract level that emotions are everywhere the same.' (Rosenwein, 2001, p. 231) A recent 'emotional turn' – actually preceded by a great deal of feminist and queer work on emotion from the 1980s onwards – has generated diverse approaches rooted in the various schools of historical practice within which scholars operate. Some approach emotion itself as a 'useful category of historical analysis' through which political, economic, social and cultural histories can be re-framed. (Scott, 1986; Frevert, 2011) Others explore individual emotions such as love, anger, and fear across different time periods and locations. (Langhamer, 2013a; Rosenwein, 1998; Bourke, 2006)

Nonetheless, attention to emotional standards and codes still characterises the work of many emotional historians – an approach for which the early work of US historians Peter and Carol Stearns provided a point of departure. (Stearns and Stearns, 1985) Indeed we know a great deal more about how 'ordinary' people were instructed to feel than about the messiness of their actual emotional practice. And yet as Sara Ahmed writes: 'Messiness is a good starting point for thinking with feeling: feelings are messy such that even if we regularly talk about having feelings, as if they were mine, they often come at us, surprise us, leaving us cautious and bewildered.' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 210) In fact the history of emotion has often privileged tidier cultural and intellectual history approaches and sources.

For those seeking to write what might be termed a history of emotion 'from below,' the identification of evidence that allows us to move beyond a top-down reading of codes and regimes is crucial, and sometimes tricky. One option is simply to read official or prescriptive sources against the grain. So, when utilising popular advice literature such as magazine problem pages, we might consider the dynamic between

adviser and advisee looking for points of contestation as well as acquiescence. (Langhamer, 2013b) In basic terms this is simply about locating evidence that allows us to access the unexpected and subversive things that people do with emotional codes, and to explore the contested space between prescription and practice. As Ute Frevert observes, 'Emotional norms, just as any social norm, were always in flux inviting individual agency as well as collective bargaining.' (Frevert, 2011, p. 215)

Or we might look to particular bodies of life history evidence – diaries, letters, photographs – the material through which ordinary men, women and children construct versions of their emotional lives for different audiences. We can use these to explore how people move between what Barbara Rosenwein has described as specific 'emotional communities [...] groups in which people adhere to the same norms of expression and value – or devalue – the same or related emotions.' (Rosenwein, 2006, p. 2) Or we can think about how they deploy specific 'emotional styles' drawing upon Benno Gammerl's suggestion that distinct spatial settings demand distinct emotional repertoires. (Gammerl, 2012, p. 164) We might also engage with recent work in cultural studies which attends to the formation of 'material moods that knit together culture on the ground' and consider how individuals conceive of, and are affected by, distinct moodscapes as they traverse everyday life. (Highmore, 2013, p. 431)

For the historian of mid-twentieth-century Britain the contemporaneously generated material held in the Mass-Observation Archive is of particular utility, not least because the organisation was committed to a study of both feeling and the everyday. Mass Observation was explicitly interdisciplinary in its ambitions, and experimental in its research practice. Founded by an anthropologist (Tom Harrisson) a poet/journalist and future professor of sociology (Charles Madge), and a filmmaker (Humphrey Jennings), Mass Observation emerged out of the broader documentary impulse of the 1920s and 30s in Britain and beyond. (Hubble, 2006) From its inception in 1937 until the mid-1950s, it recruited both paid and unpaid observers to act as 'cameras with which we are trying to photograph contemporary life [...] subjective cameras, each with his or her own individual distortion. They tell us not what society is like, but what it looks like to them. (Mass Observation, 1938, p. 66) An eclectic mix of research methods was used, including diary and discursive questionnaires, essay competitions, social surveys and ethnography. Within the archive we can find, for example, a box of competition entries on happiness, field notes on the observation of courting couples, and thousands of essays written by children about all manner of

topics, including their feelings about the future. These provide (amongst other things) ways of getting at the meanings and uses of emotion within the round of everyday life. Mass Observation therefore operates – to re-purpose Ann Cvetkovich’s well-chosen phrase – as ‘an archive of feelings.’ (Cvetkovich, 2003)

Mass Observation operates as an archive of feeling in another way too. The act of writing for Mass Observation was itself a process steeped in feeling, not least because of the very specific, and often long-term, relationship between the organisation and its volunteer writers. Diarist Nella Last, for example, recorded her life for Mass Observation for over twenty years. (Malcolmson and Malcolmson, 2010) Those who volunteered to write for the organisation – either in diary or directive form – were, and remain, a distinctive group of people, not least because they believed their own thoughts to be worth recording. This is not evidence that lends itself to easy generalisation or claims to representativeness, but it *is* characterised by the presence of extraordinarily ‘thick description.’ Individual motivations for participating in Mass Observation included a sense of citizenship, a commitment to self-improvement, the wish to be creative and a sense of the value of writing ‘anthropology of ourselves’ in difficult times. Emotional disturbance or affective need could also drive participation. ‘I frequently write to release pent-up emotion of a turbulent sort,’ confessed a Cricklewood housewife in 1937:

Happiness I can express through normal channels – the children can cook sweets in the kitchen, I can buy 1lb of fresh herrings for supper etc. – but depression and disappointment make me mute with misery. Instead of giving the children a good whack when they annoy me, I repress my anger and remonstrate with them, afterwards perhaps pouring out my passions on paper. (Mass Observation, 1937)

Research practices are themselves both relational and contingent: generated out of particular sets of social relations at distinct moments in time. The material created by Mass Observation – and which is stored in the Mass Observation Archive today – was forged out of historically specific relationships and reflexive understandings of temporality. Those who wrote for the organisation moved between past, present and future in their contributions, seeking to relate their feelings to evidence; indeed often using their feelings *as* evidence. Historians bring their own historically contingent emotional responses to bear on this material: our current subjective positions framing

our engagement with the past and our selection of evidence in the present. The generation, collection and use of historical evidence is rarely devoid of feeling.

III

In the last part of this paper I will use some of the feelings-evidence gathered by Mass Observation in the summer months of 1945 to investigate the status and use of feeling in the making of the post-war world.

The impact of the Second World War upon British society has, of course, been extensively discussed by historians. (Field, 2011) Here I want to explore whether 1945 was also a moment of emotional rupture. Did post-war reconstruction necessitate new emotional regimes, communities, styles or moods? How did ordinary Britons deal with the emotional legacy of war both as individuals and as part of a collective, and how were the interlinked categories of feeling and experience deployed as ways of *knowing* the world in 1945 – and as grounds for *participating in* an increasingly dynamic public sphere. This links to a broader interest in – to misquote historian Joan W. Scott – ‘the evidence of emotion’ and a desire to provide a historical context for what has been described as the ‘emotionalisation’ of contemporary society. (Swan, 2008, p. 89)

The problem of the individual in the world loomed large in the writing of those Mass Observers responding to the Directives of May-June and August 1945. What was the utility of individual feeling in the face of cataclysmic world events, they wondered, and what, indeed, was the appropriate place for emotion within the decision-making processes of a modern democratic state? The war had demanded carefully calibrated emotional mobilisation; peace necessitated a reconfiguration of the status of emotion within an expanded public sphere. Within this context political and social stability was held to rest in part on the ability of each citizen to manage their own emotions and those of other family members. To assist in this endeavour, both marital and child guidance were integral parts of the post-war settlement. (Thomson, 2013) In the immediate aftermath of the conflict a sense of emotional instability pervaded the individual accounts of Mass Observers. ‘I have noticed that many people seem more ‘nervy,’ strained and depressed now that the peace is here than they did during war,’ wrote one woman:

Perhaps it is reaction; perhaps a sense of the futility of it all; perhaps the feeling which practically everyone has that the peace problems are going to be as great as the war ones. 'The killings stopped, but everything else will be as bad or worse,' is the average opinion. One gets the feeling that people are lost and perplexed, astray in a dark forest. (MOA, DR3644, 1945a)

Of course the end of the war in Europe brought concrete material concerns. As might be expected employment, housing and the possibility of renewed war dominated the Mass Observer's July worry lists. The mobilization of *experience* – allied to the informative power of broadcasting – was a possible solution for one retired woman:

A constructive peace requires more unselfishness and thought and hard work than a jaded, war-weary world seems prepared to give. One would despair if there were not signs that many people are profiting by the experience of the years after the last war and are determined that things shall not take the same course this time, especially with regard to unemployment. They are also showing more interest and anxiety about foreign affairs than last time, due probably to the influence of radio. (MOA, DR 3649, 1945b)

Here we see the value attached to the experience of living through a previous post-war; we also see personality traits mapped on to the international stage, reminiscent of Margaret Mead's anthropological attempt to map 'national characters.' (Mandler, 2013) As a male Mass Observer put it:

It is not going to be an easy matter to ensure a lasting peace. Once again it is a question of selfishness and each Nation seems to be out for its own ends rather than the good of mankind and we must expect this so long as the individuals composing the Nation are selfish. (MOA, DR3634, 1945b)

Within these Mass Observation responses, the emotional fallout of the conflict also provoked concern. A twenty-year-old RAF man noted that he and his colleagues were particularly exercised by 'the infidelity of British women,' whilst a married woman claimed that 'Soldiers come home and kill their unfaithful wives and get off (with sympathy added.) [...] Soldiers have had a bad time, many young wives have had worse, much worse. These soldiers must learn self-control. If the wives don't want them *they don't* and that's that.' (MOA, DR3652, DR1016, 1945a) In both cases the writers describe a collapse of the private into the public; seen in the emphasis

upon collective rather than individual infidelity and in the perceived emotionalisation of the British criminal justice system.

The ambiguous status of emotion within the postwar world is clear throughout these responses, notably so in relation to domestic politics, science and world events. What was the proper place of emotion within the 1945 general election campaign for example? Clement Attlee's 12th June broadcast 'was not emotional enough for some of the workers in the weaving shed' according to a Yorkshire mill worker writing to Mass Observation for the first time. (MOA DR3648, 1945a) Churchill's emotional state loomed large in the minds of some Mass Observers following his defeat. 'One cannot help feeling sorry for Churchill; this must have been a great shock to him and one cannot imagine quite what he will do now.' (MOA, DR3545, 1945a) Others pondered the relationship between science and feeling. One young man even wondered whether 'people are *emotionally* afraid of science: afraid because it is a product of the brain, and their own brains are not trained to minimize the emotional aspect in favour of an outlook that would enable them to logically understand.' (MOA, DR3479, 1945b) Musing on the subject at length he admitted that he had also found it difficult 'to omit the emotional factor.'

The events of early August 1945 provoked particularly reflective accounts by Mass Observers. 'My first response to the atomic bomb was one of complete consternation – a feeling of having lost any sense of security at all, that within a few years we would all be killed and mankind would vanish from the face of the earth,' wrote a 28 year-old secretary:

At the same time I had a slight feeling of rejoicing that this must surely bring the end of the Japanese war very soon, but this was a very minor triumph compared with the staggering effect of the news. Then gradually I began to hope that the atomic bomb would mean the end of all wars, that no nation would every have the stupidity to risk a war that would mean complete extinction.' (MOA, DR3545, 1945b)

A 60-year-old Conservative voter confessed herself '[T]oo horrified to want to think or speak of it and yet it is seldom out of my mind [...] my next door neighbor wrote to the local paper and said that after the elimination camps in Germany the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the most horrible acts ever perpetrated by man.' (MOA, DR1014, 1945b.) This complex fusion of hope and terror – so characteristic of

1940's thinking – pervades the responses of Mass Observers and helps to explain the post-war turn to home, despite the scarcity of actual homes to turn to.

IV

A year earlier in 1944, Mass Observation had asked servicemen and women to enter an essay competition entitled, 'My ideas and hopes for post-war conditions.' A radio officer in the Merchant Navy began his contribution thus: 'Never before in the midst of the jumble of heroism and horror, sacrifice and bestiality, idealism and misery, that is war, have so many of the world's ordinary folk looked towards the coming of peace with such upwelling hopes.' (MOA, 1944) These hopes rested on the transformative power of emotion, as much as the reforming power of politics. Individual emotional battles and everyday emotional exchange became powerful frames for public reconstruction narratives. Reconstruction revolved around the personal in intriguing ways – not just in the foregrounding of family and home, but in the valorisation of individual feeling and wartime experience. The proper management of feeling became a way of coping with the problems of post-war British society: good citizens were emotionally literate individuals who took active responsibility for their own affective welfare. This emotion-management was necessary because of a newly emerging *right* to feel in public as well as private life. This turn to feeling was ultimately instrumental in the breaking down of public-private distinctions and is strikingly evident in the writing of so many Mass Observers in the summer of 1945 and beyond.

Indeed in the decades after 1945 emotion came to matter a great deal within public as well as private worlds, as dominant emotional styles shifted from those rooted in self-discipline to those that celebrated self-expression. We see evidence for this shift in the changing self-representations of politicians and within an everyday political culture which increasingly used feeling to unify the nation and to exclude others from it. We see it too in the field of journalism and in a growing obsession with taking the 'mood' of the nation. It is also apparent in the pervasiveness of psychological ways of thinking within the developing welfare state, as well as in the permissive legislation of the 1960s in which the right to feel and to act on one's feelings gained a measure of legal sanction. Even the economy was not immune to the advance of feeling. A turn towards 'emotional capitalism' harnessed emotional labour, imposed emotional burdens and claimed to valorise emotional intelligence. (Illouz, 2007)

Using the evidence generated by Mass Observation in the middle of the twentieth century we can also, however, see the messy and complex ways in which individuals understood the status and role of emotion within a rapidly changing world and constructed *themselves* as emotional citizens. As feminist scholars have long noted, 'power circulates through feeling.' (Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012, p. 116) It could also drive social and political change, acting as a vehicle for the operation of agency within everyday life, because as Swan suggests, 'emotions are imagined to provide a privileged source of truth about the self and its relations with others.' (Swan, p.89) Feeling was increasingly seen as a legitimate basis upon which to assert knowledge claims about the world and carve out a place within civil society. Nowhere is this perhaps more evident than in individual responses to the events of 1945.

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¹ Mass Observation material is used courtesy of the Trustees of the Mass Observation Archive. Emphasis in the original.

² There were 178 responses to these questions.

³ There were 97 responses to these questions posed in the May-June 1945 Directive.

⁴ The description 'ordinary' is not of course unproblematic. This issue is explored in my forthcoming article 'Who the hell are ordinary people? Ordinarity as a category of historical analysis.'