

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Davies, William. *Nervous States: How feeling took over the world.* London, UK: Penguin Books, 2018, 252, \$28.96, hardcover, (9781787330108)

The election of Donald Trump in the United States in 2016 and the recent process of England leaving the European Union have revealed the prominence of modern populism and its connection to mass emotional appeal. One of the most substantial contributions made by political theorist William Davies in his newest book includes the use of emotion to understand populist development. Broadly, *Nervous States: How feeling took over the world* (2018) asks the reader—whether academic or concerned citizen—to critically analyze how emotions have impacted democracy within the 21st century. According to Davies, this is done in two ways, highlighted by separate sections in his Davies’ book: the decline of reason and the rise of feeling.

One of Davies’ most important contributions to political and theoretical sociology is his argument that emotions have begun to rule over political engagement by displacing reason. An example of the emotional impact on politics includes the association between current events such as possible terrorist attacks and our sense of self and voting practices:

In the murky space between mind and body, between war and peace, lie nervous states: individuals and governments living in a constant and heightened alertness, relying increasingly on feeling rather than fact. Mapping that condition and identifying its origins is the task of this book. (xii)

Using contemporary examples as well as historical accounts that demonstrate the role emotion plays in society, Davies traces the increasing reliance on feeling instead of reason; reason has become a political opinion that can be adhered to or disregarded. Davies’ uses the example of the “march for science” in Washington DC, where science was cast as a political project, to exemplify this shift in reason (24). The “march for science”, Davies argues, turns scientific objectivity into a political value that can be adhered to and that must be defensible (24). Focus on citizen’s emotional responses to the state differentiates this work from others that attempt to make sense of contemporary

nationalism and populism by highlighting the tension of the post-truth era when expert knowledge is challenged (125).

Davies further argues that a key drive behind this call to feeling is attributed to politicians' ability to succeed in revitalizing political opinion and activity by drawing forth the sentiments of the masses (16). Using the example of political crowd mentality when highlighting this point, he explains how politicians can invoke victimhood during rallies in order to elicit aggression toward political opponents (20). Emotional triggers of the masses are contingent upon the formation of a collective of likeminded people. Davies argues that this is done through different mediums such as the Internet (15, 146), through which anonymity is particularly conducive to the expression of resentment, fear and anger (Davies 2018:52).

The author also suggests that people are more likely to believe in ideologies that reflect their own pain and suffering than intangible facts (89). Again, his focus on pain and emotion is new to the analysis of nationalist and populist beliefs, but is well supported. Davies shows that those who are in physical pain are more likely to be drawn to politicians who rely heavily on calls to deep-seated emotions such as fear, anger and nervousness (89). Davies' connection of the physical and the social allows for an understanding of physical suffering and its influence over seemingly unrelated arenas such as the polity.

Nervous States takes the unique approach of conceptualizing physical suffering as a contemporary justification for overall feelings of disenfranchisement. Davies states, "Pain demands explanation and justification" (108). Placing the blame of physical pain onto the Other or the perceived exclusivity of social justice in left leaning circles fulfills two purposes, the first is giving an explanation of why suffering is occurring and the second is providing a way to fight it by placing blame on a direct figure (118-119). Davies structures his argument around a paradox: those who are suffering seem to cling onto ideologies or vote for individuals that they believe will revitalize sensations of power or a nostalgic belief that the past was more desirable than the present (118). Through this explanation of the relationships between pain and suffering, Davies presents a new way to analyze the rise of nationalist movements which would be beneficial for any social scientist who is attempting to understand these circumstances within the current political climate.

Davies' historical analysis of emotional appeal is also a significant focus in this book. Using Napoleon's creation of the nationalist propaganda newspaper *Le Moniteur Universel* as a historical example,

Davies helps readers place modern day nationalism into a socio-historical context (142). The author's usefulness as a contemporary commentator is furthered by his comparison between historical emotional propaganda and contemporary online propaganda that is often used by the far right. Appealing to the masses through the creation of militarized and politicized nationhood in propaganda, whether through newspaper or online websites, also establishes a modern evaluation of communication and its ability to appeal to emotions through propaganda (15).

Davies's recount of Napoleon's militaristic strategies to modern political groups is also crucial to new research on the mobilization of online hate and right-wing extremist groups as new forms of politicized conflict (15). This argument highlights the fact that war and conflict traditionally isolated to the battlefield are now being transposed to online forums where emotions openly fester into conflict. Whereas war used to be used to describe international conflict, now the term is being used to conjure up similar emotional reactions to much smaller parties, such as the far right warning their members about "social justice warrior" (131). Davies' analysis of power is historically significant because it connects figures such as Napoleon and von Clausewitz's theorization of the power of armies driven by emotional appeals of nationalism, to the current contemporary political moment (129). Through these historical examples, Davies calls for researchers to be wary of emotional appeals by politicians to hidden resentment and feelings of powerlessness.

Nervous States offers a new point of analysis for scholars who are attempting to understand the current contentious political climate leading to the distrust of news media, academia and fact. It calls for an understanding of those who feel left behind in a diversifying society and stresses that society must combat the growth of nationalism through a mixture of feeling and similarity (225-226). Per contra, one of the weaknesses of Davies' book is that he fails to use a more pragmatic approach to the study of feelings and give credence to actors' abilities to not fall victim to the manipulation of dominant social forces, such as the emotional sentiments of politicians. Future research on the emotional motivations of citizens would be wise to take Davies' analysis into consideration while also making room for agency.

REFERENCES

Davies, W. 2018. *Nervous States: How feeling took over the world*. London, UL: Penguin Books.

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