

Book Review: Nervous States: How Feeling Took Over the World

In Nervous States: How Feeling Took Over the World, William Davies examines how feeling has come to reshape our world today, displacing the role historically afforded to reason and dissolving longstanding distinctions between the mind and body, between war and peace. The book provides a timely diagnosis of the contemporary social and political dominance of feelings over facts, writes [Lilly Markaki](#), while locating hope in the discovery of a shared world inhabited by 'feeling and thinking' beings.

***Nervous States: How Feeling Took Over the World.* William Davies. Jonathan Cape. 2018.**

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The modern world endeavoured to build itself upon what it perceived to be the most solid and admirable of materials: truth and progress. From the seventeenth century onwards, and in accordance with this programme, philosophers and scientists alike sought to regulate and transcend human feeling in order to provide an objective description of the world, so as to generate 'a basis for peaceful consensus' (35). This was the case with Thomas Hobbes, for instance, whose 1651 celebrated political treatise, *Leviathan*, concludes with the words: 'Truth, as opposeth no man's profit, nor pleasure, is to all men welcome' (45). Yet, in our own time, science and expertise more broadly seem to have lost their capacity to unite us on a common ground, with facts themselves often leading not to peace but to conflict. If it was once king, reason is now overthrown by feeling.

This is the central premise of [William Davies](#)'s new book, *Nervous States: How Feeling Took Over the World*, and the process, the history of which it seeks to unfold. That facts no longer are what they used to be is one of the few things that most of us – having witnessed Donald Trump's administration especially – can still agree upon today. And yet the idea that feeling has somehow now taken over the world might at first seem a little strange to some, for reality indeed appears to be a place where emotion has almost completely disappeared – the world, it is often observed, is a cold, dark place.

Feeling, however, as Davies's main title conveys, is not always a positive thing: it does not always mean 'love' and 'empathy'. There are also those 'nervous states' – fear, pain and anxiety – which, for Davies, 'have greater political potency than others' (xiv), and which he successfully shows to play a leading role in shaping our reality.

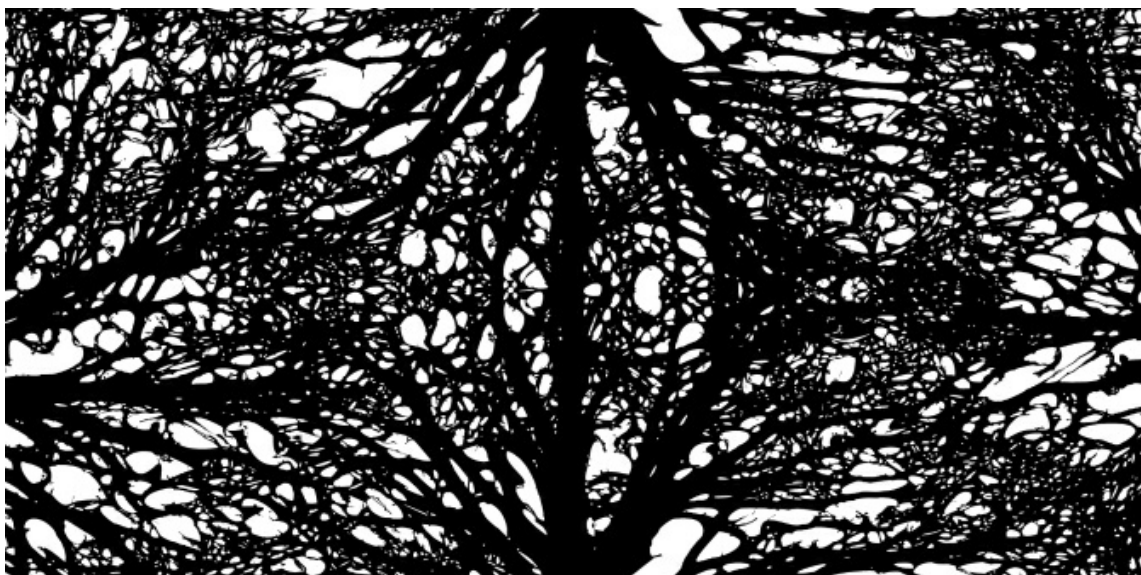
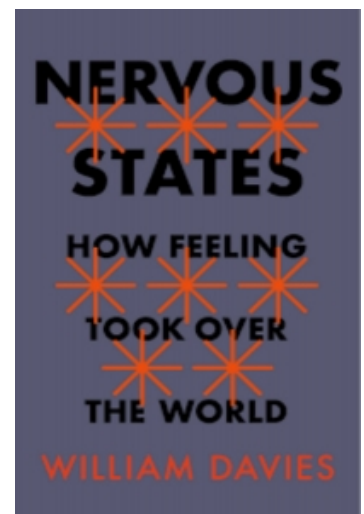


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Issuing forth by recounting last November's [Black Friday incident at Oxford Circus](#), the opening section of the book does a great job of revealing fear's capacity to mobilise people, even when the threat is not actually real: 'Around an hour after the initial evacuation of Oxford Circus [...] the emergency services were formally stood down. There were no guns and no terrorists' (x). Blown out of proportion 'thanks to a combination of paranoid imagination and social media' (x), the event turned out to be, as Davies aptly puts it, a 'ghost disturbance' (x). But if feeling can make people flee, it is also what motivates people to organise and to form what is known as a 'crowd':

If crowds matter at all, it is because of the depth of feeling that brought so many people into one place at one time. As in the wars that dominate the nationalist imagination, crowds allow every individual to become (and feel) part of something much larger than themselves (7).

The discovery that human emotion can be a powerful force and a tool for mobilisation is, of course, not new, but something that, as Davies shows, was already understood by those such as Napoleon, whose conscripted army, introduced in 1793, gained its strength and numbers by converting the population's revolutionary sentiment into a military resource (126-30). This harnessing of feeling is a strategy that continues to lie at the heart of populist politics everywhere today, although its main targets are now more often pain and anxiety:

People who are suffering, emotionally and physically, will go in search of explanations for their feelings. But they will also go in search of recognition for them. One of the greatest political assets of populist leaders, spanning both left and right, has been their ability to visit economically depressed regions and convey empathy with people who were others ignored or dismissed. This is not something that more mainstream or professional political figures are able to do with the same perceived authenticity (118).

The division between mind and body, on which the modern world came to rely since the seventeenth century – together, for Davies, with the distinction between war and peace – can no longer be sustained. As the author compellingly argues in the chapter titled 'The Body Politic', human bodies, and especially those in bad health, express themselves in ways that are extremely significant for politics today. According to a report published by *The Economist* magazine and which Davies cites here: 'if diabetes were just 7% less prevalent in Michigan, Mr Trump would have gained 0.3 fewer percentage points there, enough to swing the state back to the Democrats' (99). And this is only one of many examples presented in this section, proving the author's earlier point that:

The nervous system, which produces pain, arousal, stress, excitement, becomes the main organ of political activity. It is as feeling creatures that we become susceptible to contagions of sentiment, and not as intellectuals, critics, scientists or even as citizens (16).

Even reactions against expertise, a phenomenon that is becoming more and more prominent, tie in with this bodily dimension of politics, for what fosters the gap between experts and those whose livelihoods their data attempts to represent is the knowledge and feeling that 'experts and policy makers can talk about things like unemployment [...] but they will never know how it *feels* to be unemployed' (61). These reactions, Davies observes, 'may seem like an irrational rejection of truth itself, yet are more often a rejection of the broader political edifice from which society is governed' (28).

As it happens, underlying the technocratic state and its mathematical approach to governance – a historical source for which Davies discovers in William Petty's 1672 *Political Arithmetick* – is progressively found a quest not for peace, but for power. 'The need to create a picture of the world can also be born out of a desire to own it' (59): this is a truth that the historical realities emerging out of colonisation now more than confirm, but which Davies links to contemporary approaches to warfare as well. One example here is Valery Gerasimov's article from 2013, 'The Value of Science is in the Foresight', where the Russian general argues for a military strategy that openly employs information as its main weapon. The proposition – now known as the [Gerasimov Doctrine](#) – 'carries dramatic implications for the status of knowledge and emotion in society', writes Davies in 'Knowledge for War'. 'Ultimately it challenges the ideal of expert knowledge, as something that sits outside the sphere of conflict, putting in its place a different ideal in which knowledge is used as a weapon' (125).

Contributing to the changing status of knowledge has, of course, also been its progressive marketisation – something Davies explores near the end of his book. ‘Once knowledge is treated primarily as a business instrument’, the author observes here, ‘the instinct is to develop ever faster and better-tailored means of acquiring and controlling it [...] Military techniques stray into the business world [...] producing a culture of economic combat’ (152), and leaving us, producers and consumers alike, in a state of perpetual anxiety. How closely this field resembles a battle for world domination becomes particularly evident during Davies’s engaging analysis of Silicon Valley, a global centre for high-tech corporations of which ‘the real goal’, according to the author, ‘is to provide the infrastructure through which humans encounter the world’ (186).

If *Nervous States* succeeds, finally, in making a case for the social and political significance of feelings, it is here, in its final sections, that it begins to serve also as a stepping stone from which to approach the future. Entrepreneurs like Peter Thiel, Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg, Davies reminds us, all have their own visions for progress. And, while these can appear far-fetched – as is the case with [Zuckerberg’s dream to achieve telepathic communication](#) – they should still be taken seriously, given these men have already transformed the fabric of reality in tangible ways.

The new generation of Napoleonic high-tech entrepreneurs may attain their dreams of living to 150 or 200 or longer. These “founders” may build empires that outlive them. Some may manage to colonise Mars, as Elon Musk insists they must. If this is the future of progress, then it cannot be something that includes most people, and much of its impetus is to escape the fate that awaits the rest of us (226).

How should we, ‘the rest of us’, proceed then? ‘The challenge facing us today’, Davies writes, ‘is how to establish and discover a shared world in the future, inhabited by beings who are feeling *and* thinking’ (223; emphasis added). For the author then, the answer is not to be found in some sort of return to the past or even to reason, for ‘the facts alone won’t save us’ (207) now. A way forward might instead involve acknowledging our feelings, but focusing and coordinating our responses and efforts towards the suffering we share. ‘Especially as the inhabitable territories of the planet shrink’ (225) – a geological destiny common to all and which Davies acknowledges – a politics based on the recognition ‘of common and equal humanity’ (225) might, indeed, be our only hope.

Note: This review was first published on the [LSE Review of Books](#).

About the Reviewer

Lilly Markaki is a PhD researcher in Media Arts at Royal Holloway, University of London. In 2014, she graduated from the University of Glasgow’s ‘Art; Politics; Transgression: 20th Century Avant-Gardes’ MLitt programme, having previously received a BA in Art History from the same institution. Her research project examines French-American artist Marcel Duchamp in an attempt to renegotiate his position in relation to movements such as Dada and Surrealism and to rethink canonical understandings of the figure, arguing, finally, for an ethical and political dimension in his work. [Read more by Lilly Markaki](#).