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Review of Nervous States: how feeling took over the world - Will Davies

- **Dr Eleanor Jupp, Senior Lecturer in Social Policy, University of Kent**

Our crisis-ridden political, economic and cultural 'conjuncture' (Hall 1992, see also Clarke 2014) clearly demands ambitious analysis. In 'Nervous States', Davies sets out to meet this challenge, in a far-reaching and thought-provoking book. The book focuses on both the rise and fall of various forms of expertise that have shaped contemporary Western societies, and the new digital, economic and political formations that seem to be replacing them, finding expression in populist politics and mistrust of institutions. The book's ambition and timeliness is to be applauded, as well as its targeting of a more general readership, given the time it often takes for academic research and publications to grapple with unfolding contemporary events.

The book proceeds primarily through an historical analysis focusing on a number of key Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers, economists and scientists. Particular attention is paid to Hobbes in the first part of the book, and the Napoleonic war-theorist Clausewitz in its later stages. Providing therefore a far longer historical time-frame than much analysis of contemporary politics, the first part of the book focuses on matters of democracy, statecraft, economics, public policy and science, and how the contemporary Enlightenment Western state settlement was formed via the assertion of certain forms of rational thinking and expertise. Davies broadly argues that such forms of thinking produced partial accounts of human experience, excluding emotional, embodied and subjective aspects. For example, in Chapter Three, he discusses the constructed nature of welfare statistics and policy discourses and how they exclude the lived experience of citizens. As this example suggests, the style of analysis could be seen as broadly Foucauldian although this is not acknowledged explicitly. The second part of the book analyses the emergence of emotional and subjective dynamics within politics, economics and technology, over some time but intensified in recent years due to digital culture. Davies argues that the reasons for this include the rise of faith in the disruptive dynamics of free-market economics, and associated digital entrepreneurs who seek to monetise interpersonal relations and bring intimacy, emotion and instinct to the centre of public discourse. Davies' tone and approach is measured throughout, both acknowledging the importance of enabling the expression of subjective experience, but also showing the problematics of the resulting contemporary public sphere.

A key, and particularly interesting strand of the analysis is the assertion that the lines between 'peace' and 'war' are now increasingly blurred within political strategies and digital flows of

information. There is a suggestion that we all now inhabit the anxious and 'nervous state' of a war-footing – over-whelmed by confusing flows of information and primed to respond to contemporary events via instinctive rather than more considered means and timeframes. The book certainly encourages the reader to put down their smart phones and consider anew the psychic and social costs of engagement in endless 'real time' digital culture. Indeed, at a moment when the lines between individual and collective experience seem to be being remade, the book demonstrates the value of a psycho-social approach to contemporary politics (see Hoggett and Thompson, 2012). Overall, Davies' analysis proceeds in a provocative and sometimes playful manner, cutting across history, contemporary culture and our changing collective psyche with a broad brush. This approach which works very well in places, such as in the discussion in Chapter One on questions of the size of the crowd at Trump's inauguration, an analysis which deftly pulls together the matters of politics, expertise and changing modes and experiences of democracy at stake.

Elsewhere his analysis is less convincing, and for me, this is related to Davies' very broad brush approach to the citizens or ordinary people, whose understandings of and interactions with the state and market are central to the discussion. In focusing on sites of power, there is little acknowledgment of the differentiated ways in which groups in society might experience the state, the market, and the other institutions discussed, and make different kinds of claims on them (see Jupp et al 2017). More specifically there is little discussion of social movements whose focus has been precisely the critique of the rational and 'objective' discourses that Davies draws attention to. Social movements such as feminism, the trade union movement and the civil rights movement, but also the ongoing struggles for equality of LGBT groups, those with disabilities and the 'service users' of health and welfare services have all fought on exactly this terrain – to deconstruct the social and institutional discourses which work to exclude and deny their lived experience (Beresford 2016). Indeed, in relation to health and embodiment it feels particularly odd not to mention the long-standing concerns of feminism to reclaim embodied subjective experience from medical and social discourses and forms of expertise (eg Young 1997).

Therefore the focus on the lived experiences of ordinary people within public discourse is not as new as Davies suggests. Such dynamics have in recent decades found expression via forms of qualitative and participatory research (eg Patrick 2014 in relation to welfare and 'lived experience'); and, in relation to the state, via radical and emancipatory forms of professional practice as well as forms of media including recently digital platforms. Indeed when considering the rise of state bureaucracy in its various forms there are less well known stories to consider. For example, the development of social work practice in the mid/early 20th century occurred a separation from the discipline of social policy by a group of pioneering female researchers and practitioners (see Oakley 2015 for an

account of this). With a more recent focus, Janet Newman (2001) has written about the movements of women from radical and activist backgrounds into the 'spaces of power' of the state since the 1960s, and the complexities of identifications and commitments that arise.

All this is to argue that there are always different versions and competing rationalities within sites of expertise and power, located in the everyday practices of those working within and beyond their boundaries, and indeed beyond official discourses and accounts, which may give us different kinds of hope. As others have argued in relation to 'neoliberalism' as a category (Barnett 2005, Larner and Craig 2005), there are contested and differentiated strands of such an ideology, and to invest it with too much coherence risks over-stating its all-consuming power. Davies' analysis risks suggesting that the contemporary conjuncture has arisen mostly from the writings and actions of a small number of men. Not that Davies sees this as unproblematic, but rather such an approach makes it hard to see where change and progress might arise from. Social movements are mentioned in brief in places in the book, such as Black Lives Matter towards the end, yet the analysis up until that point has left little room for the critique and resistance which might fuel such a movement.

To return more firmly to the question of emotions and feelings in the public sphere, I would not take issue with Davies' central claim that the discourses of institutions and sites of expertise have often excluded them. Rather I would argue that there are other histories of emotional and embodied experience having been represented and asserted within them, and indeed that more humanistic and progressive inter-subjective dynamics have long been part of institutions of power in different ways, albeit somewhat hidden (Jupp 2013). Considering where 'care' might be found in public life, for example, might alter our view of institutions (de la Bellacasa 2017).

Nonetheless digital culture has undoubtedly turbo-charged the intensity and speed with which emotions are represented and shared in the public sphere. The book is in many ways animated by the problems of emotive far-right populist politics, although as already noted, there is less attention to the more progressive sharing of emotions within public and online spaces, for example in the sharing of experiences of women and vulnerable groups (Jupp et al 2017). As such I agree with Davies that it is neither reasonable nor desirable to try to exclude emotions from our new forms of public interaction, to put the genie back in the box of politics. Instead we need to consider the potentialities and demands of such a politics. This may mean considering anew how to make emergent public spheres into spaces of care, the enabling or 'holding' environments that Honig (2017) argues we all need. This may mean new collective forms of regulation and new institutional and public frameworks around which we might find common ground, as Davies also mentions. At a time when politics seems to be opening up ever-more emotionally charged divisions in society, it

remains possible for both online and offline spaces of interaction to also bring us together in new ways, perhaps based on shared human experiences of care and vulnerability. Such humanistic and ethical interactions are already part of public discourses, and we need to find ways to bring them centre stage.

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