



Nervous States: Democracy and the Decline of Reason

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In this sweeping and provocative work, political economist William Davies draws on a four-hundred-year history of ideas to reframe our understanding of the contemporary world. He argues that global trends decades and even centuries in the making have reduced a world of logic and fact into one driven by emotions—particularly fear and anxiety. This has ushered in an age of “nervous states,” both in our individual bodies and our body politic.

Eloquently tracing the history of accounting, statistics, science, and human anatomy from the Enlightenment to the present, Davies shows how we invented expertise in the seventeenth century to calm the violent disputes—over God and the nature of reality—that ravaged Europe. By separating truth from emotion, scientific, testable facts paved a way out of constant warfare and established a basis for consensus, which became the bedrock of modern politics, business, and democracy.

Informed by research on psychology and economics, Davies reveals how widespread feelings of fear, vulnerability, physical and psychological pain, and growing inequality reshaped our politics, upending these centuries-old ideals of how we understand the world and organize society. Yet Davies suggests that the rise of emotion may open new possibilities for confronting humanity’s greatest challenges. Ambitious and compelling, *Nervous States* is a perceptive and enduring account of our turbulent times.

Nervous States: Democracy and the Decline of Reason Details

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Author : William Davies

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Graham says

An interesting theory addressing the changes in the way that politics is being done in the UK. Why experts have been essential in the past and why they are unwanted in the present. This book is part of a wider argument about the un civilising of public discourse. Worth reading.

Daniel says

We are in the age of Nervous States, constantly living in fear of terrorism. Le Bon first noted the psychology of crowds and its contagion effects of emotions and dumbing down the individuals. Social media now performs a similar function. Terrorism scares us so we are willing to let the State have more and more power in return for safety.

Hobbes: humans value their own observation more, and thus cannot be trusted to make observations. They are prone to violence, so they choose to have the state (Leviathan) to maintain peace.

Boyle & Royal Society: scientists, judges, and other experts can have objective observation and discussion apart from their own ambition and biases. So they can be trusted to tell us what to do and know. William Petty pushes mathematical and empirical knowledge further, creating social and political science where numbers can be used for 'evidence based management'. John Graunt published the first mortality table. Technocrats are thus born and it's common for experts and politicians to become the same elite group.

However over use of statistics by politicians render it less trusted over time. The financial crisis showed the folly of blind trust in numbers. Also just because economic growth is positive on average does not mean it benefits me in particular. While American GDP per capita grew over the past 40 years, the bottom half actually saw a drop of 1%, and the top 10% saw 115% growth! Even though the bottom half did not become poorer, they encountered relative economic deprivation that feels unfair, so they vote for Trump. Likewise for polls, for result of voting depends not so much on opinion but the strong feeling that pushes people to actually vote. Furthermore, the well educated experts seem to be the same people who would benefit from their own analyses of capitalism!

When people are without hope and meaning, it can manifest as physical pain; opioid addiction becomes a kind of comfort. People who are in pain are more likely to vote for authoritarian politicians, because they are more willing to inflict pain, such as repression and torture, on the 'others'.

It's getting hard for the public to distinguish impartial analysis from spin. So campaigns such as Brexit that eschew economic analysis can win by paradoxically branding dispassionate analysis as 'project fear'! As a result, with regards to British immigration, anecdotal reports are received wrongly but statistical analyses provoke anger. This is irrational and totally inexplicable from the numbers point of view. Facts are often manipulated to cause maximal impact, especially when used in social media. Gerasimov's doctrine considers many non-traditional ways of war.

Emotion and morale are great elements in fighting wars, and shopping and have been harnessed by generals and marketers. Losing a war permanently changes the national psyche, whereas winning affects it little. Demagogues harness the bitterness of the disenfranchised very well.

A great general does not know the whole truth, but has the courage to bend reality to his own vision. Napoleon unleashed the nationalist feeling of the French. Great politicians and entrepreneurs are thought by some people such as Peter Thiel to completely dominate their industries. 'Competition is for losers.'

Hayek thought markets are supreme to socialism; it gauge our feelings. 'Knowledge and ignorance are relative concepts'. Expert knowledge is not necessary for it to work. Central bankers must therefore weigh each word with care, so as not to unduly affect market 'sentiment'. Truth becomes less important but adaptability is paramount. Education is all about signalling for employability.

Social media can control our emotions, and allow trolls to inflict pain on others. It is easy to blame and attack, but hard to build on the internet.

Nationalism:

1. Gives the feeling of solidarity and equality
2. Gives meaning. Authoritarianism is attractive when community collapses
3. Gives self esteem

Scientists need to fight back by sharing their own feelings about their work, especially for catastrophies like climate change. No longer can science be the dispassionate voice and facts cannot speak for themselves.

I found this book interesting but rather disorganised, with points being repeated many times. I feel sometimes I have read some parts when it is really a new chapter. A 4 star book.

Todd says

A big picture attempt to explore today's social, political, and technological anxieties. If you like your nonfiction interdisciplinary and multilayered, Nervous States is in your wheelhouse. While I'm not sure I learned anything new factually, Davies's convincingly combined ideas about human physiology, Enlightenment epistemology, 20th century culture and counterculture, big data, and current identity politics to tell a story of who and what advanced Western societies have become. Nervous States defies easy categorization which I'm sure is one of the reasons I enjoyed it so much. Some readers may dislike the lack of a narrower focus in service of a more limited argument, but I enjoyed this book's wandering path. Definitely one that's going to linger for awhile.

Zoë says

**** spoiler alert **** An important sociopolitical commentary. The idea that self-esteem is valued by populations over notions of prosperity or fairness is so so important to appreciate as nationalism continues to rear its head. For years we have been fed measures showing how well everything is going, but the stark truth that life is still hard and standards of living are actually in decline for a great many gives a fuller and important picture of many Western societies. I recommend you read this sooner rather than later!

Andrew Howdle says

A fascinating investigation of the connection between the political state and states of mind. Hobbes's

Leviathan image hangs over the book and Davies moves expertly (in an Age that despises experts, as he points out) between contemporary reality and the history of political ideas from Hobbes and through the Enlightenment. The first section of the book made cohesive sense to me-- the second section teemed with so many insights that I am engaged, as a reader, and occasionally lost. The writing is incisive, provocative and original and explains well how we have created a State that cannot deliver all we expect of it as our needs have gone beyond its economic and philosophical limitations.

David says

This was fascinating!

If I'm frank, I liked it better when it was drawing attention to the problems than when it was suggesting solutions. But I really loved the presentation of the problems.

On the Oxford Circus / Selfridges drama:

"The media was not so much reporting facts, as serving to synchronise attention and emotion across a watching public."

"Events such as this typify something about the times in which we live, when speed of reaction takes precedence over slower and more cautious assessments. As we become more attuned to 'real time' events and media, we inevitably end up placing more trust in sensation and emotion than in evidence."

"Information becomes valued for its speed as much as its public credibility. This is a whole new way of handling the question of truth, that often runs entirely counter to the original scientific ideal of reason and expertise."

"The promise of expertise ... is to provide us with a version of reality that we can all agree on. The promise of digital computing, by contrast, is to maximise sensitivity to a changing environment. Timing becomes everything. Experts produce facts; Google and Twitter offer *trends*. As the objective view of the world recedes, it is replaced by intuition as to which way things are heading *now*."

"there is something telling about the fact that this inauguration row arose around this particular topic: a matter of great emotional significance, but where experts are comparatively powerless to resolve differences. ... A neutral objective perspective is hard to come by difficult to defend."

"As Hannah Arendt wrote, 'there is hardly a political figure more likely to arouse justified suspicion than the professional truth-teller who has discovered some happy coincidence between truth and [political] interest.'"

"The civil and gentlemanly dimension of expert knowledge never includes everyone as a participant, and can be actively oppressive. This exclusion may not have been recognised as a flaw to those at the centre of such clubs and networks, but for colonised territories and peoples, the potential violence of expert research, experiments and measurement has always been clear. Colonies were governed without regard for the distinction between 'military' and 'civil' tools of power, and the difference between civil policing and military conflict was not clear-cut. Developing societies have been used as test beds for economic policy experiments and drug trials, which produce knowledge to be brought back to centres of learning. **Political opposition to expert knowledge has been with us all along, merely pushed out of the eyeline of many Westerners. The think that *has* changed in recent years, however, is that large swathes of Western populations appear to now view expertise in a similar way. ... The nativist idea that the nation needs *reclaiming***

from the elites has echoes of the rhetoric of anti-colonial nationalism."

"The objective reality of peace has not prevented a rising sense of fear."

"Experts and policymakers can talk about things like unemployment or the environment, but they will never know how it *feels*"

"As states become more statistical in their outlook, the feeling arises that they don't really care about the people themselves."

"In the 350 years since statistical expertise came into being, it has been a victim of its own rhetorical success. So much trust has been placed in numbers that anyone wishing to be trusted (for good reasons or ill) inevitably cloaks themselves in a veneer of mathematical reason. But it's not clear if this ploy is working any longer."

"Donald Trump won 2,584 counties to Hillary Clinton's 472, but those counties that voted for Clinton account for 64% of American GDP. ... Britain's economy is the fifth largest in the world and yet the majority of regions experience GDP per capita below the European average"

"In many ways, the lives of individuals in Manhattan have far more in common with those with those in central London, Barcelona, or Paris than they do with other Americans in rural Ohio. National aggregates and averages no longer reflect lived reality to the same extent that they once did. They are failing to represent how things are."

"As policymakers came to view knowledge and cultural diversity as valuable economic assets, so the conflict between metropolitan and rural values was heightened, adding economic inequality to a set of moral controversies."

"Opinion polls in the UK, for example, have shown that 28% of British people believe 'torture works' and 27% think it should be permitted. But among supporters of the UK Independence Party, the figures are 53% and 56% respectively, indicating that some UKIP supporters are sceptical that torture works, but believe it should be permitted anyway."

"The lure of authoritarianism lies in the ideal of resurrecting a more visceral, less careful form of power, that could settle matters of life and death in public, and gives vent to anger."

"But the wager of progress assumes that safety, health and welfare are more important than fundamental beliefs or cultural romance. If these goods start to recede, at least for certain significant sections of society, then we shouldn't be surprised if the same sections turn against the progressive modern project more generally."

"The modern, technocratic state promised to protect people from avoidable harm, such as violence, severe poverty or disease, but it had never sought to guarantee a complete absence of pain."

"This desperation for control is also a political syndrome, in which disenfranchised groups might go as far as sabotaging their own prosperity, if only that grants a little more agency over their own future. Better to be the perpetrator of harm than always the victim, even if it is harm to oneself."

"War helps to narrate pain rather than treat it. ... Part of the appeal of war, at least as an idea, is that ... it represents a form of politics where feelings really matter."

"Like anything else in war, [intelligence] is valuable to the extent that it facilitates speed of decision-making and victory over the enemy; whether it is 'true' is something that the public cannot establish, given the secrecy that surrounds it."

"Where victory is enjoyed and then quickly taken for granted, the experience of loss shapes our identity, forging a melancholic sense of nostalgia."

"The reason guerrillas, computer hackers, suicide-bombers or Internet trolls are so difficult to disempower is that they *have* very little people in the first place."

"Resentment can even be the basis of self-sabotage, if in damaging oneself one is also damaging the other."

"What allows entrepreneurs to do this is not facts or professional qualifications, so much as impressions and information that others haven't (yet) received. As in war, speed, secrecy, and courage are of the essence."

On futures, derivatives and all those trading things I don't understand: "The economic rewards for the institutions and individuals who construct and sell these insurance products are legion. The stark implication is that there is more money to be made in what cannot be known, namely the future, than in what can."

"In these conditions, individuals must focus less on seeking truth or objectively, and more on being adaptable."

"Rumour offers far more potential for profit than published fact."

"Equally, the main political question that arises is not 'can I trust this person to tell the truth?' but 'will this person lead me to my destination?'"

"Stripped of strategic goals, the findings of data science have a strange banality, even on obviousness."

"Digitisation of everyday life seems to be offering rising opportunities for violence, but little additional capacity for power, other than for the tech giants that own and control the new infrastructure."

"What Silicon Valley technology giants share with fascism is an insistence on fixing problems immediately, and not bothering to debate them first."

Ross says

From the book - "In matters of 'post-normal' science, few things stand still long enough to generate hard truths, and the audiences that need convincing are a mixture of experts and no experts. This is attractive territory for conspiracy theorists and lobbyists, who sow suspicion in scientific consensus, and attempt to debunk the entire scientific enterprise."

Zoë says

An important sociopolitical commentary. The idea that self-esteem is valued by populations over notions of prosperity or fairness is so so important to appreciate as nationalism continues to rear its head. For years we have been fed measures showing how well everything is going, but the stark truth that life is still hard and

standards of living are actually in decline for a great many gives a fuller and important picture of many Western societies. I recommend you read this sooner rather than later!

Joe Bambridge says

Let me preface this by saying I am a huge fan of Davies' academic articles, though this is the first book of his that I have read cover to cover. In a way I regret that, because I'm sure it's not his best. I'm slightly confounded as to what kind of book this was meant to be; it touches on some big ideas in the history and philosophy of expertise and makes interesting contributions, but with little depth to the analysis, minimal citations, and combines this with references to recent viral moments only tangentially related to the subject of discussion that kind of cheapen the whole thing. Davies' key argument - that the conditions that allowed for the cultivation of progressive expert knowledge have broken down as the features of war creep into every aspect of social life, with the result that people seek napoleonic leadership over consensus, intelligence over knowledge, and violence as a response to fear- is strong, and some details to the argument are great. Davies' attention to pain and the corporeal side of politics is particularly novel and could have been developed even further, as is the section on how the validity of statistics disappears under conditions of geographic inequality. But again these moments of real breakthrough, which have the potential to provide the 'fake news' discourse with some actual intellectual ballast, are interrupted with randomly selected and rather trite examples of twitter spats or recent news items. It gives the impression that while Davies wanted to provide a contrast to the more reactionary and conspiracist interpretations of fake news, a publisher was there constantly reminding him of the centrist baby boomers who might buy his book if he mentioned Russia and Sean Spicer.
