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Book Review

Anna DURNOVÁ,
***Understanding Emotions in Post-Factual
Politics: Negotiating Truth***

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***Understanding Emotions in Post-Factual Politics:
Negotiating Truth***

Anna Durnová

Durnová, Anna, Cheltenham (UK) & Northampton (USA): Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019, 176 p., ISBN 9781788114813. Hardback: £75.00, \$115.00
2019

For many years, the validity of facts and the role of science have been brought into doubt. Every time there is a new discovery, established knowledge and established interests are being challenged. In fact, in the course of history, the disregard for expert opinion and knowledge has led to the establishment of alternative facts that lead to fallacious inferences. This disregard is not a grassroots tendency, but often a top-down strategy by political elites in their quest for power and for control of the masses. The politics of the day are affected by emotionality and this allows the seeds of populism to find fertile ground, whereby the ordinary citizen becomes entangled in an emotional public sphere that treats common sense, best practice, and expert knowledge with contempt. Combined with the overabundance of conspiracy theories, the use of social media to disseminate political messages, and the prevalence of slogans that can mobilise the population, post-factual politics create a dangerous and explosive mix that threatens the existence of representative democracies, keeps trust in formal political institutions low, and brings into question acquired rights and axiomatic positions in modern societies.

In her book, 'Understanding Emotions in Post-Factual Politics: Negotiating Truth', Anna Durnová explores the connections between emotionality and factual knowledge involved in the production of science in modern times. The questioning of scientific knowledge is not a new observation—let's think of Galileo—but a natural process that takes place within a specific context. In other words, the context gives legitimacy to knowledge and sets the scene for the acceptance of scientific knowledge. Emotions, especially in times of crisis, are important in helping us to understand political and social behaviour. Crises are disruptive, turbulent situations which create urgency and uncertainty (Zahariadis et al., 2021). In times of crisis, citizens look for short cuts, and emotions offer a lens for making political judgments (Capelos & Exadaktylos, 2017). Hence, emotionality is on the rise, especially in the form of anger, anxiety, shame, and disappointment, affecting priorities and the schedule of our preferences. Emotions are lenses that allow us to side with one or other camp in a debate based on our values.

Highlighting the story of Ignaz Semmelweis, the founder of modern hygiene (1846), Durnová starts out on a journey through modern science that discusses instances of science denial, the concept of vexatious knowledge, and critical inquiry into truth production. Semmelweis was 'persecuted' by his own scientific community for making a new discovery around hygiene practices in a prestigious Viennese hospital linked to increased deaths of women giving birth. His scientific work was marred by his strong character and his willingness to go against the scientific establishment in a non-conventional way, but his scientific ingenuity was recognised posthumously in the 20th century.

Durnová makes a few key stops in recent history, taking in the discovery of HIV, the tobacco industry lobby, climate change deniers, the publicity concerning Andrew Wakefield's alleged link between the MMR vaccine and autism in children, and the start of the anti-vax movement. These earlier events help us to contextualise and see the 'scenography' behind the contempt shown by the Trump administration for all things scientific along with the persistence of 'alternative facts' and the purported authenticity of the (now former) US President's opinions. Emotions are used against the scientific elites and the established knowledge-order, creating strong divisions that challenge factual truth. Durnová argues that science has become a victim of its own principle of value-free knowledge and perhaps it is time to 'accept that science has developed a culture of emotions that needs to be reconsidered in the light of the current attacks on truth' (p. 64).

Talking about 'vexatious knowledge', Durnová suggests that it focuses on the 'moment of the new discovery being debated, being asserted to be true or being vilified as unscientific' (p. 88).

Hence, it is important to look at how truth is narrated and performed. Looking at the different rhetorical devices used to interpret science and truth becomes crucial in analysing frames and the way in which truth is twisted through the use of 'alternative facts' and the use of a particular language. This discussion brings us to the present day. Durnová explores the silencing of science and the concerted efforts to politicise expertise during Trump's presidency. Studying closely the March for Science movement, the First 100 Days blog and the Silencing Science Tracker, the last chapters of the book focus on the necessity to politicise science for science's benefit. At the same time, the book calls for the emotional reflexivity of researchers that allows them to present knowledge and to make emotions part of scientific expertise.

Our current circumstances, being in the middle of a global pandemic and a public health crisis, make this book extremely relevant and topical. The book allows us to draw parallels with the distrust of segments of the public in the effectiveness of vaccines and the disregard for scientific expertise around the coronavirus pandemic, but also the questioning of public policy responses and the guidance issued by national governments in the form of contagion mitigation measures. It could even be argued that the political demise of Donald Trump was a result of his inability to control emotionality around the spread of the pandemic and the many obvious blunders he made in 2020 in going against the scientific community in an open and direct way. Nonetheless, it was not only Donald Trump who questioned science: another typical example was Boris Johnson in the UK, who politicised expert advice to legitimate political decisions, or Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil who repeatedly ignored scientific advice to the detriment of his citizens' lives.

Durnová's book is a rare insight into the nexus of emotionality and science. At the same time, it presents the foundations of the debate around post-factual politics, while providing us with a solution. Post-factual politics undermine the expertise of scientists and their accountability to society. In order to combat this, scientists should embrace their emotions and political opinions, Durnová encourages. For this kind of position not to be misunderstood, Durnová suggests that 'to be aware of the partisanship we create through scientific knowledge does not mean to take responsibility for any political development enacted as a result of scientific discoveries' (p. 131). Taking advantage of emotions can help science to counter the post-truth trend and to attack post-factualism. In other words, science must understand well the means of communication of the 'other side', and as Durnová says, show that it stands above society.

Capelos, T., & Exadaktylos, T. (2017). Feeling the pulse of the Greek Debt Crisis: Emotional reactions on the web of blame. *National Identities*, 19(1), 73–90.

Zahariadis, N., Petridou, E., Exadaktylos, T., & Sparf, J. (2021). Policy styles and political trust in Europe's national responses to the COVID-19 crisis. *Policy Studies*.

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