

# FOCUS

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## JUST LET IT ALL OUT!

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PHOTO: PICTURE ALLIANCE / ASSOCIATED PRESS / CHARLES DHARAPAK



Statesmanlike:  
as the first black  
U.S. President,  
Barack Obama  
consciously adopted  
the style of his  
predecessors.

# EMOTIONS, SPOT ON

*TEXT: MECHTHILD ZIMMERMANN*

According to traditional dogma, political decisions should be rational and sensible. Under no circumstances should they be emotional. Reality, however, has always looked somewhat different. The impact that feelings had and continue to have on political events and the rise and fall of leaders is the primary field of interest for Ute Frevert and her team at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin. Intriguingly, their insights on the past shed light on current events.

Contrarian conduct: the first president of the United States, George Washington (to the left in the famous Lansdowne portrait), perpetuated the aristocratic tradition.

The 45<sup>th</sup> president, Donald Trump, consciously broke with political conventions in order to mobilize voters who had until then felt excluded by the political elite.



IMAGE: GILBERT STUART/NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY



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After sixteen years as Chancellor, Angela Merkel will surely be remembered for one thing: her prosaic, rational style. Only very rarely did she allow herself to openly show her feelings. And yet in retrospect, it is precisely the times when she showed emotion that stand out. These include her elation when the German soccer team won the World Cup in 2014, her decision to open the borders to Syrian refugees during the refugee crisis of 2015, her urgent appeal to limit interpersonal contact in the corona crisis in order to protect people who were particularly at risk, and the fact that she was clearly moved when she hugged President Emmanuel Macron during a farewell visit to France. Why are these emotions so important? Is it not enough to know what political goals the Chancellor is pursuing? Why do we care whether or not something makes her happy, or what moves her? One might argue that it is because we as humans are social beings, and are there-

fore interested in what other people feel. We are also not simply rational benefit maximizers, as ideal economic theory would have us believe. Quite the contrary, in fact: feelings play a part whenever people interact with each other – including in politics. It was Angela Merkel's combination of fact-based politics, a restrained demeanor without posturing and those rare but genuine emotional moments that won her the respect and trust of the population.

## Win goodwill and secure power

To better understand the role that feelings play in politics, it is crucial to take a look at the past. For a long time, historical research has paid too little attention to the impact of emotions. It is in large part thanks to Ute Frevert, Director at the Max Planck Institute for Hu-



PHOTO: REUTERS/DOMINICK REUTER

man Development in Berlin, that this has changed in recent years. As Frevert, a historian, explains: “If you want to know why it is that people form societies, develop and pursue shared goals, why they separate off from each other again and go in different directions, or become enemies and cause harm to each other, you have to pay sufficient attention to feelings and the way in which they shape events.” The research coming out of the center she leads shows that many aspects of historiography appear in a new light when emotions such as fear, anger and hatred, as well as hope, trust and empathy, are taken into account. It becomes possible to explain how the relationship between the people and those who govern them in the past has developed and changed.

Ute Frevert has examined the developments following the French Revolution. The momentous upheaval that

took place in Paris in 1789 led to fundamental changes throughout Europe. The common people had entered the political stage by force. The deposition and execution of the French king and his wife caused consternation among the European monarchs, who feared for their safety and their continued right to rule. This is where what Ute Frevert defines as “the politics of feelings” comes into play: those in power take active steps to win over their subjects through emotions. “The politics of feelings was one way of securing power,” Frevert says. “As the sociologist Max Weber put it, power requires ‘compliance’; in other words, the consent of those who are subject to rule. This compliance can be brought about by the use of force. However, it works better when people submit voluntarily. To achieve this, the ruler needs to convince them, or better still, to engender feelings of trust, affection and perhaps even love.”

## Kings needed to court their citizens

One way was to demonstrate benign feelings toward the people by, for instance, public greetings, public announcements or personal appearances. Frevert has found numerous pieces of evidence. A letter written in 1789 by Luise, queen of Prussia, to her brother states: “I will do all I can to win and earn the love of my subjects, not through force but through civility, a courteous nature, gratitude [...]” For the aristocratic ladies and gentlemen, putting on a show of loving their people was by no means always enjoyable. Another of Luise’s letters, written in 1794 to her husband, when she was still crown princess, mentioned an invitation to the heirs to the throne to have coffee and cake at the Potsdam marksman’s guild: “Just think what delightful entertainment awaits us today,” she writes sardonically. “What else are we to do? We are obliged, regardless of whether or not we wish it, to go through with it and perhaps be driven to madness, just to have the honor of paying court to our subjects.” The rulers felt obliged to woo their own people.

This anecdote reveals another aspect of the politics of feelings that Ute Frevert emphasizes in her research: “Citizens are not simply passive recipients of emotional signals, and do not necessarily react with goodwill to the messages being sent from above. Rather, they have expectations, preferences, and perhaps even demands. And that’s the risk that rulers bear: a ruler who makes an effort to win over the hearts of their subjects may fail in the process. Moreover, they send the message that they are in need of their subjects’ love. In this way, they relinquish a portion of their power.” This dilemma grew increasingly acute during the course of



the 19<sup>th</sup> century when democratization and the participation of ordinary citizens in politics gained traction (although at that time, women were frequently still excluded). For this reason, the connection between the ruling dynasty and ordinary people needed to be fostered and kept alive. This was done by, for instance, organizing festivities to celebrate the king's birthday, which were extremely popular in the towns and local communities. Still, at that time, there was no such thing as "the people". During this period, the society of feudal estates, with its fixed division into the nobility, the clergy, the commoners and peasants, was in the process of being dissolved, making way for a civil class-based society. In this society, different groups, parties and social movements formed whose interests, in some cases, diverged widely. This was probably one of the reasons for the concept of nationalism spreading so rapidly and successfully during this period. It was a unifying force, but at the same time, it also changed the role of the ruling elites. The kings, queens and emperors became national identification figures and the highest representatives of the nation, and the expectations of their citizens increased accordingly.

## Autographed cards from the emperor

Ute Frevert has revealed that during this period, there was a growing desire among the populace to get close to the king or emperor, to see them and perhaps even shake their hands. As numerous requests for autographs sent to Wilhelm II show, signed photographs of the German Kaiser were extremely popular at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Men such as the members of the Rhenish veterans associations formed a cordon to honor the Kaiser whenever he was traveling through their region. However, they were also motivated by a desire to be seen by him, as one contemporary source describes: "[...] a look from his dear eye was thought to be beneficial, they wanted to feel that his eye was still there for them." The disappointment and sense of outrage was all the greater, therefore, when in 1906, the car bearing Wilhelm II simply sped past the men waiting for him in the Rhineland.

Even so, as Frevert shows, the love and devotion of ordinary people were not automatically directed towards the Kaiser – or at least, not towards him alone. Some good indications of this include pictures of politicians that were hung in German living rooms. "You would find portraits of Otto von Bismarck and Queen Luise, but not necessarily of the Kaiser himself," Frevert explains. "There were also Social Democrats who displayed images of their heroes from the labor move-



IMAGE: FRIEDRICH GEORG WEITSCH

ment, such as Ferdinand Lassalle or August Bebel, next to a picture of the monarch." Some of the first democratically elected rulers enjoyed a similar degree of admiration as their aristocratic predecessors, for instance the first president of the United States of America, George Washington. Kerstin Maria Pahl, a researcher in Ute Frevert's team, has examined Washington and his times more closely. "At that time, Washington was a very controversial figure," she explains. "There were disputes over how much power the central government should hold, and how much should be divested to the individual states – something that is partly responsible for the political discord in the U.S. today." Even so, says Pahl, painted or printed copies of George Washington's portrait were broadly popular



PHOTO: PICTURE ALLIANCE / DPA / MARCUS BRANDT

Reservation and euphoria: during the 2000s, it was common for high-ranking politicians to freely express their delight at soccer matches – as seen here with German Federal Chancellor Merkel and President Gauck at the 2014 World Cup in Brazil. For Queen Luise and Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, such wild displays of emotion would have been unthinkable.

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during his time in office. “They were put up in private homes, inns and public buildings, and people collected them in albums. At that time, there was a close emotional bond with the new state, as is reflected in many contemporary reports from the founding years of the U.S. These powerful feelings were also directed towards the president.”

## Outbursts of anger versus level heads

Kerstin Maria Pahl, who holds a PhD in history of art and visual culture, researches, among others, feelings as

embodied by rulers in their portraits. The Lansdowne Portrait, one of the most famous paintings of George Washington, shows the American president in the tradition of European kings, displaying an expression of decisive boldness, while also exuding calm and level-headedness. The picture reveals much about the contemporary ideals of how a head of state should behave and what feelings he should express. “One of the most important standards at that time can be very aptly summarized as ‘composure’. Composure is an expression of calmness of spirit, beneath which there is deep emotionality, even a passion that is, however, externalized to a very moderate degree only.” Washington’s composed demeanor was emulated by many at the time, including many of his successors.



The 45<sup>th</sup> U.S. president ostentatiously broke with this tradition. During his time in office, Donald Trump became notorious for his outbursts of anger and hot-headed rhetoric, as well as his more general (arguably) impulsive behavior. In Kerstin Maria Pahl's view, this was intentional. In order to understand the break with tradition and the reasons for its success it is necessary to see that, within each society and its institutions, there exist a large number of unwritten rules. They determine which feelings individuals are allowed to display in any given context, as well as the manner in which they are permitted to be expressed. Someone giving a speech in parliament will show their emotions differently than they would at home with their family, and in yet another way when they are visiting a retirement home. These conventions are constantly in flux. Pahl cites politics and soccer as an example. At the end of the 1990s, soccer had a grubby, lower-class image. It was not until the World Cup championship took place in Germany in 2006 that intellectuals began talking about soccer in public. Since then, high-ranking politicians have also been able to freely express their elation in the stadium, as did Chancellor Merkel and Federal President Gauck in 2014 at the Soccer World Cup in Brazil. Incidentally, this was one of the very few occasions in which the two were seen together in any one place. This usually only happened at events held in the German parliament to commemorate the victims of National Socialism.

Feeling conventions can change either gradually or through conscious disruption. "Sometimes, there is a tipping point. Old rules suddenly look rigid, even mummified," Pahl adds. "When someone turns up, consciously announcing: 'I don't care any more how things used to be done; I'm going to do them my own way', it can be very seductive." Doing away with conventions can give the impression of being trail-blazing, revolutionary and courageous – provided the time is right. Maybe it was the case that, during the U.S. presidential race in 2016, Donald Trump was simply in the right place, at the right time. With his style of behavior, he succeeded in mobilizing people who felt excluded and no longer represented by the attitudes and language of the political elite.

It is notable that in relation to his COVID pandemic policy, Trump is often described as "cold-hearted" or

"unfeeling" by domestic and international media. Kerstin Maria Pahl has analyzed this characterization from a historical perspective. In her research, she shows that already during the Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a lack of feeling was considered a negative attribute. Adam Smith, the Scottish moral philosopher and founder of classical national economics, best-known today for his theory of the invisible hand of the market, saw empathy as the basis for social cohesion. A lack of feeling, on the other hand, meant social exclusion because it denied that all people were similar. "Even in the past, accusing someone of being cold-hearted was often an attack, meant to discredit the other and to distance oneself from them," Pahl explains. "However, some forms of a lack of emotional expression or even indifference can have a more positive image – it can mean being unbiased, objective or simply very cool."

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### SUMMARY

After the French Revolution, monarchs began to demonstrate positive feelings to their subjects in order to win recognition and secure their power.

Today, politicians are also subject to expectations as to which emotions they are allowed to express in public in order to appear "statesmanlike". When he was U.S. president, Donald Trump consciously broke this rule.

The more people participate in politics, the more diverse the feelings that come up against each other will be. Emotional management will become an important skill that politicians will need to learn.

## Thoughts and feelings are inseparable

Ultimately, expressions of feeling, and the way they are perceived and interpreted, are often ambiguous. The norms that underly them are constantly changing. One thing, however, is clear: feelings are essential to politics. They cannot be separated from rational thought or decision-making – not least, as Ute Frevert emphasizes, because thoughts and feelings are closely interconnected in our human brains.

History has shown that the more that people are able to participate in politics, the greater the number of emotions that come into play, and the more diverse they become. Frevert illustrates this point with a current example: "If you are standing in a town square – an image that Olaf Scholz was fond of using during the election campaign – and there are some people whistling from one corner and others cheering from another, then you have to respond, but without pounding your fist on the table or getting into a shouting match yourself. This emotional management gets increasingly difficult to the same degree that politics becomes a matter for the masses." In the future, politicians will probably be measured against how they deal with this situation – particularly the new Chancellor, Olaf Scholz.

 [www.mpg.de/podcasts/emotionen](http://www.mpg.de/podcasts/emotionen) (in German)



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