

Birgit Aschmann. *Gefühl und Kalkül: Der Einfluss von Emotionen auf die Politik des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts.* Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2005. 238 S. + 17 SW-Abb. EUR 49.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-515-08804-6.



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Feel-Politik

Among the German words that have gained currency in the English language, “Realpolitik” would certainly rank with “Schadenfreude” and “Zeitgeist,” perhaps trailing only such quotidian utterances as “Gesundheit!” and “Kindergarten” in terms of its regular usage. The term itself connotes more than just the primacy of state interests. It also suggests the absence of moral consideration and emotional influence. In fact, as Birgit Aschmann argues in the introduction to the volume, most historians approach the study of the political past primarily as an exercise in revealing the underlying Realpolitik, under the assumption that decisions flow from a pure distillation of reason. Aschmann perhaps overstates this tendency slightly. Scholarship on the “mood” of European leaders in July 1914 and on German voting behavior in the early 1930s, to name just two examples, has readily acknowledged that emotions directly influence politics. She is absolutely correct, however, in pointing out that historians almost never address the impact of emotions on politics systematically and as a central aspect of their analyses, nor do they draw on the extensive research in other fields, especially psychology, to show how emotions affect decision-making.[1]

This collection of ten essays, which grew out of a conference of the Ranke-Gesellschaft in 2003, seeks to address this shortcoming in the historical scholarship. In Aschmann’s extensive and very helpful introduction, she notes that all of the essays reveal important unresolved issues that will continue to occupy future scholarship: the difficulty of defining an “emotion” in the first place; the mistaken tendency to conflate “emotion” and “irrationality”; and the critical need for much greater attention to the findings of disciplines like neurology, psychology and communication studies. Aschmann underscores the daunting challenges that face any historian who approaches this subject, beginning with the knotty question of what constitutes an emotion. Despite important research over the last twenty years, the term itself resists clear-cut definition and categorization. Is “trust,” for example, an emotion? Aschmann never arrives at a firm definition herself, but she neatly summarizes the ways in which psychologists and other researchers, including the historian Ute Frevert, have approached the problem. Historians also face the additional hurdle of reconstructing how actors in the past actually felt when even the historical actors themselves may not have known. Aschmann

fully recognizes these difficulties, but she also makes a convincing plea for a much deeper and more extensive exploration of the historical role of emotions, insisting that even if the historian cannot determine the feelings at work with complete certainty, he or she should at least acknowledge explicitly this “immense ‘void’” in our comprehension of a given event (p. 32).

Aschmann organizes the book into five sections, with two essays exploring each of four emotions through a particular case study, and the first two essays examining the effects of emotions on human behavior more generally. In the opening essay, Hilde Haider argues that going back to Plato, scholars have viewed cognition and emotion as mutually exclusive, a polarized view that researchers have only revised in the last few decades. Her essay cites an array of studies that demonstrate the interconnectedness of the two, including one that showed a tendency of stock markets to climb on sunny days and fall on rainy ones. Her conclusion, that emotions play a fundamental role in directing human behavior, seems so obvious, however, that I wondered whether this revelation was as seismic a rethinking of conventional wisdom as Haider indicated. Hadn't the advertising industry come to something like this conclusion by the early twentieth century? More importantly, the nineteenth-century discourse of gender ascribed to women an almost purely emotional sensibility. I would have liked to read a much larger discussion of gender here and a fuller historical contextualization of the research on emotions.

In the second essay, Jan-Oliver Becker examines three films from the Nazi period—*Triumph of the Will* (1934), *Heimkehr* (1941) and *Hitlerjunge Quex* (1933)—in terms of the emotional responses that they seem calculated to elicit in their audiences, the films' *Bedeutungsangebote*. Becker offers some very good, close readings of the three productions, and he clearly knows his film theory, but he resists any speculation at all as to the reception of the three films and instead focuses more modestly on the likely intent of the filmmakers. Here, too, some historical context on the contemporary understanding of emotions might have proved useful. What assumptions did Nazi filmmakers and propagandists make about the emotional impact of cinema as a medium that might reveal something about the making of these three films? Did these assumptions rest on research or observations of film audiences? Moreover, what can present-day research on the emotional impact of visual images tell us about the possible audience reception of these films at the time? Did reviews from the period address the emotional impact?

The essays in part 2 focus on fear (*Angst*). Stig FÅrster argues in the first of these essays that “exaggerated fears” guided the decision-making of the German army elite in the four decades leading up to World War I (p. 77) and, because of this, he concludes that the war itself was “completely irrational” (p. 75). FÅrster sets about to distinguish those aspects of the German security situation that gave “occasion for justified concern” from those that fueled unfounded anxiety. The problem, as he himself recognizes early on, is that many things that may strike us as irrational today, appeared completely reasonable at the time (p. 75). FÅrster does an admirable job of recreating the climate of fear that pervaded the German High Command from the 1870s onward. The essay convincingly shows the extent to which fear guided the actions of Berlin's top generals and thereby contributed to the outbreak of hostilities. FÅrster's conclusion regarding the complete irrationality of the decision to go to war remains unconvincing, however. Given the increasingly tense European context in which the high command operated, why should historians not view the decisions in 1914 as understandable, even rational, responses to a legitimately perceived security threat? FÅrster clearly demonstrates that fear influenced this particular historical outcome, but by portraying this as pure irrationality, he perpetuates the notion that emotion has no role in rational thinking, a misconception that both Aschmann and Haider had already convincingly dispelled earlier in the volume.

In the second essay on fear, Georg Schild wonders why McCarthyism and the 1950s “Red Scare” gripped American society to a far greater extent than Europe, when the western Europeans, in fact, faced a much more immediate threat from communism and the Soviet Union. Schild argues that America's fear of communism reflected a much larger concern over collectivist impulses in general and the entrenchment of the post-New Deal liberal establishment. Furthermore, Schild notes, the very nature of the American political system, with its interest groups and two-year election cycles, may have favored the cynical instrumentalization of anti-communism in order to gain and maintain power. He concludes that McCarthy simply exercised cold calculation in seizing upon anti-communist crusading as a campaign strategy. This argument is certainly highly plausible, but it leaves fear completely out of the equation by arguing that McCarthy was not afraid of communism at all. Schild's essay might better have addressed the question of how fear affects politics by concentrating more on how McCarthy's campaign tactics, cynical though they

may have been, triggered such a powerfully anxious response in the American electorate.

In part 3, Karen Hagemann and Stephen Conermann address the emotional pairing of love and hate. Hagemann looks at the importance accorded to these two emotions during the nationalist mobilizations of 1812/13 in the German-speaking lands. She argues that the nascent love of a fatherland, combined with the hatred of the French enemy and foreignness in general, played a critical role in the German defeat of the Napoleonic army. She concentrates on propaganda, noting that a large-scale “Föderkrieg” preceded and accompanied the battlefield “Degenkrieg” (p. 108). Interestingly, Hagemann writes that some publications blamed the Enlightenment, with its emotional coldness and celebration of cosmopolitanism, for having severed the people’s connection to their own history, culture and sense of national attachment. One could read their tracts, therefore, not just as calls for greater love of the fatherland or hatred of the enemy, but for greater emotionality in general. Hagemann shows through numerous examples that the propagandists extolled Germans to love their nation and to hate their enemy, but she never addresses whether the propagandists themselves felt these emotions, nor does she give any sense of this propaganda’s possible effectiveness. Hagemann does a thorough reading of numerous patriotic tracts written during the Napoleonic Wars, but greater heed to Aschmann’s call for interdisciplinarity might have yielded more interesting results and ones that focused much more specifically on actual feelings during this period.

In the second essay in part 3, Conermann examines the writings, speeches, and interviews of Osama bin Laden and other Islamist leaders to argue that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 stemmed from “ice-cold calculation” (p. 126). Conermann has written a finely grained essay that offers a careful and concise overview of the three main intellectual currents at work in the Muslim world—traditionalism, modernism and Islamism—and explores how Islamists have legitimized the use of violence. This essay, like Schild’s on McCarthyism, however, leaves emotions almost entirely out of the equation. Instead, Conermann argues convincingly that the terrorist attacks did not result from “irrationality” or an “Islamist emotionality” (p. 149). I do not doubt his conclusion, but if that is the case, this essay seems out of place in a book that promises specifically to look at the role that emotions did play in history, as opposed to the role they did not play.

Part 4 of the collection focuses on “honor” as an historical force in two periods of German history. Birgit Aschmann, in an exemplary essay, shows that “Ehrgefühl” (a sense or feeling of honor) played an important and overlooked role in the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. Aschmann does not just discuss the general discourse of “wounded honor” in the period leading up to conflict, but she also explores the emotions of the key actors themselves. She engages with the wider literature on emotions and carefully notes that *Ehrgefühl* is socioculturally shaped; that both emotion and rationality contribute to it; and that it tends to follow certain laws, especially when injured. Moreover, Aschmann recreates the historical context in which honor came to hold so much cultural power. Aschmann’s essay provides a model for how historians might integrate a closer awareness of emotions into their historical research, and she heeds her own call for greater attention to other disciplines by offering a sophisticated discussion of how a sense of honor can dictate human behavior.

In the second essay in this section, Michael Salewski looks at honor and shame in post-1945 West Germany. Salewski begins with a broad discussion of Germany’s perceived loss of honor in 1918 and its perceived restoration in 1933, before discussing the Allies’ postwar decision to confront Germans with their wartime atrocities through films, photographs and forced visits to the concentration camps. Salewski sees this decision as an effort to reduce Germans to the status of adolescents. Despite this policy, or perhaps because of it, Salewski argues, postwar West German society was marked not by prominent discussions of honor and shame, but instead by their complete absence. Salewski raises some interesting points in this essay, including the claim that the reestablishment of German honor had to come from the outside, particularly from the former enemies, rather than from West German society itself. This brief contribution seemed much more of a tentative thought-piece on the issue of postwar German honor and shame, though, than a fully developed essay.

The last two essays in the collection concentrate on “friendship,” which, like honor, draws on a number of interrelated emotions rather than comprising a single emotion in its own right. Jürgen Elvert looks at the role of friendship in the European process of integration. He asks whether European integration resulted entirely from Realpolitik or whether an emotional connection propelled it as well. In particular, Elvert looks for indications of trust and forgiveness between individuals and countries in the postwar period and he men-

tions certain key political friendships, including those between Helmut Schmidt and Valerie Giscard d'Estaing and between Helmut Kohl and François Mitterand. In the context of the EU, Elvert defines friendship as the search for "the common good," and he explicitly includes *Zweckfreundschaften* (goal-driven friendships) within his purview. Elvert does provide a few interesting illustrations of the evolving relationships between western European countries, such as the moment in the 1950s when other European representatives stopped referring to the German representatives simply as "our German colleagues" and started calling them "our German colleagues and friends" (p. 192), but to what extent did this change reflect an emotional attachment, and which emotions were involved?

In contrast to Elvert, Rafael Biermann specifically rules out *Zweckfreundschaften* from his essay on the diplomacy of German unification because he feels the term does not contain enough underlying emotion. In this fine essay, Biermann argues that key leaders in the 1980s and 1990s personalized politics to an unusual degree and allowed emotions like affection and trust to guide their decision-making. Biermann does not deny that the dealings between statesmen involved in the German reunification process relied a great deal on the commonality of their political goals and on straightforward quid-pro-quo negotiations. His thorough, thoughtful and tightly organized analysis clearly shows, however, that emotions, too, played a role here and that historians should not overlook the extent to which genuine feelings of friendship helped to convince the Soviet leadership to support German unification.

As a collection, *Gefühl und Kalkül* provides a use-

ful service in simply reminding historians of the fundamental, and all too often overlooked, role that emotions and feelings have played in past political events and decisions. The essays also provide fine overviews of their chosen subjects. As such, this collection would be of value to historians of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe in general and especially to those who specialize in German political and diplomatic history. Furthermore, the outstanding essays by Birgit Aschmann and Rafael Biermann recommend themselves to anyone interested in seeing what a sophisticated consideration of emotions can contribute to the analysis of past political events.

The book also highlights, however, the incredible difficulty of integrating a genuine investigation of emotions into historical scholarship. In particular, most of the scholars in this volume have not heeded Aschmann's call for greater attention to the research on emotions in other disciplines. In an era of exponentially expanding scholarship, when it is difficult enough to stay abreast of one's own narrow historical subfield, this is clearly easier said than done, and it may require the development of an interdisciplinary subfield of its own. This collection of essays does a service simply by setting the agenda and by showing historians just how much work still lies ahead of us.

Note

[1]. The social sciences, on the other hand, as Aschmann notes, have been highlighting the role of emotions in politics for several decades, a tendency that one readily recognizes in analyses of the present U.S. administration. See, for instance, the social psychologist David G. Meyer, "Intuition or Intellect?" in the *Los Angeles Times* (August 22, 2006), p. B13.

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