Introduction

Using Popular Culture to Trace and Assess Political Change

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The German federal election in September 2021 marked a significant transformation for German politics.1 As Chancellor Angela Merkel decided not to run again, the election spelled the end of her 16-year tenure; it also signaled a major shift in the German party system. The right-populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) entered the Bundestag again after their first entry in 2017, implying—for the first time since 1949—the establishment and sustained parliamentary presence of a party on the national level to the (far-)right of the Christian Democrats.2 The challenges facing the new parliament and government after the election are paramount.3 The climate crisis looms as large as ever. With the exception of the AfD, all German parties (and a distinct majority of voters) see this as the most pressing issue to tackle. However, the scope of action will be limited as the extensive state debt accumulated through COVID-19 relief measures exerts pressure on the specific German model of social market economy. Finally, the international environment has seen drastic changes in the last years: While the election of U.S. President Joe Biden as successor to Donald Trump implies a return to normal for transatlantic relations, the UK exit from the EU shifts the balance between the remaining member states. After the Euro, refugee, and pandemic crises, European solidarity is strained, complicating Germany’s role as the EU’s “reluctant hegemon” or “gentle giant.”4 This reluctance or restraint connotes far more than a strategic policy choice: it is deeply rooted in the German history of the twentieth century that witnessed the cruelty and atrocities of the Nazi regime.

The recent German Politics and Society special issue edited by Karolewski, Pänke, and Roose starts from a related premise in asking how Germany’s changing role in the world affects images and preconceptions of Germany in other countries.5 The present special issue pursues a similar approach, but the focus is on how the consequences of these shifts are reflected in and incorporated into popular culture in Germany. Writers, authors, and directors pick up and reference political decisions, historic events, and societal changes in fictional works that parallel “official” stories offered by politicians, journalists,
and serious news outlets. These fictional accounts play a complementary role in informing citizens and voters. While popular culture has long been seen as separate from “serious” issues like politics, there has been increasing acknowledgment that images and stories conveyed by popular culture have their own standing and relevance in constituting the public sphere.6

By definition, popular culture is a mass phenomenon and therefore all around us. In the form of movies, television shows, video games, or comedy, it engrosses us day by day, shaping our opinions and mindsets. It influences our worldviews and affects our preferences and opinions.7 Fictional representations, especially when they contain a politician as the main protagonist or are set in political institutions,8 leak into our perception of “real” politics, priming us in our assessment of the political process or societal issues. Political scientist Lily Goren sees an even more fundamental connection: “Popular culture is a key aspect of democracy since the demos will indicate what they find to be of interest, popular to them.”9 Not surprisingly, political actors therefore take these popular representations into account and adapt their strategies accordingly, for instance, through incorporating references to them into their rhetoric. There are prominent recent examples where public figures utilized their clout and capital built in the entertainment sector to pursue a career in politics (e.g., Donald Trump in the U.S. and Volodymyr Zelensky in Ukraine), illustrating the fluid borders between the spheres of entertainment and politics.10 On the other hand, fictional stories, tropes, and images transported by popular culture act as a mirror and are indicative of how a society defines itself and understands politics.11 With this special issue we want to explore the dynamics at the intersection of popular culture and politics with a specific focus on Germany.

Several recent developments make such an endeavor even more important and useful. First, the rise of the AfD does not simply imply a shift for the majorities in the German party system. Considering Germany’s past, the emergence of a right-populist, radical-right party is worrisome.12 Second, this is not an isolated occurrence but rather a global phenomenon, where anti-establishment forces are challenging the established liberal order with its democratic norms and values. Across the globe we have witnessed a rise of populist figures who question the foundations of representative parliamentarism and paint a picture of a self-serving, self-interested political class that exploits the state and the “true people.”13 While political science research points to new cleavages in societies and social inequalities as explanatory variables, populists might garner support based on cynical and derogatory representations of democracy in popular culture. Hence, it is helpful, first, to identify and deconstruct dominant stories and tropes about politics to understand why and how they...
cross over from the realm of popular culture to politics and how they become so potent, and, second, to analyze how popular culture employs and disseminates stereotypes about societal groups or ethnicities. For instance, if Germans appear in U.S. productions, they often do so in a stereotypical way (“Ver is ze money, Lebowski”). With the rise of Internet streaming platforms (e.g., Netflix, Amazon), movies and shows travel easier and quicker around the globe. In addition, these platforms engage themselves as producers of new content, where the locations are chosen with a global market in mind. Movies and television series intentionally include and emphasize certain cultural (and political) characteristics of the region or country they are set in. An international audience lacking knowledge about the history or society of a foreign nation is especially susceptible to these images and exaggerations, illustrating the need to inspect these productions from a detailed scientific perspective. A closer look at popular culture products originating in Germany helps us understand how they play a role in shaping the world’s image of Germany.

The contributions to this special issue explore these challenges for representing Germany’s politics in current German films, television shows, games, and comedy. Drawing on different fields, the authors enable a cross-disciplinary perspective. Yet all of them pursue the same set of questions: What are the overarching mechanisms of transforming the German political system and society into stories meant to entertain the audience? How are the challenges summarized above mirrored in these stories? Which elements speak to a unique German point of view on issues that are part of the discourse in other countries around the world? With perspectives from political science, sociology, history, and cultural studies, the contributions use specific products as case studies to reconstruct patterns, tropes, and narratives tied to the selected works that appear frequently in popular culture. This not only helps us understand mechanisms of storytelling; it also helps us recognize public (mis)conceptions of politics in Germany. All of the authors rely on a qualitative text analysis of the content of movies, television series, comedy acts, and video games, at times adding analyses of visual representations. The goal is a systematic engagement with appearances of politics in German pop culture products.

The starting point for this project was a seminar organized in 2019 by Andreas Stuhlmann and Niko Switek for the 43rd Annual Conference of the German Studies Association (GSA), which took place in Portland, Oregon. The productive exchange and discussion illustrated the benefits of a cross-disciplinary perspective and ultimately led to this special issue with its six contributions. Sabine von Dirke inspects the term “social market economy,” which is central to the German political discourse. Von Dirke argues that popular culture fills a void in debating what is right and wrong in current neoliberal
capitalism. Identifying a recent wave of feature films offering audiovisual narratives about the “brave new world of work,” her analysis demonstrates the ability of popular culture production to function as a seismograph for complex social-political issues and as a space for sounding out possible meanings, by extension shaping political decision-making.

Annika Orich, Niko Switek, and Jörg Neuheiser all focus on German television series that span the genres of drama, satire, and documentary, with varying production backgrounds. Orich analyzes the popular Netflix series *Dark*, which revolves around a nuclear plant in a small town in West Germany. Switek examines two political satires produced by the German public broadcasting company *ZDF*, both of which are set in the political sphere (i.e., national parliament, city hall). Neuheiser reviews two popular television productions by the German broadcaster *RTL*, which in 2014 created a scandal revolving around the fast-food chain *Burger King*.

Orich explores what makes the show *Dark* “undeniably German” but also “relevant” to global audiences. Despite nuclear energy being a contested issue in Germany, the series shies away from taking an activist, controversial stand on the subject, resorting instead to subtle criticism that is aimed, in a perhaps stereotypical German manner, at technology in general. Orich finds that the show offers a sophisticated blend of issues and aesthetics concerned with questions of sustainability, accountability, and choice in a technologized world. Switek’s analysis shows that the critical stance of satire has an extensive overlap with the anti-establishment rhetoric expressed by populist challengers. Storytelling devices and tropes employed to make viewers laugh at fictional representations of politics align squarely with populist agitations against “self-serving elites” and a political class detached from the “real people.” The medium’s extensive dissemination makes it easier for populists to garner support in rallying against “die da oben” (the ones up there). However, a close reading of the selected shows uncovers messages of appreciation for politicians as public servants who have the difficulty of balancing particular interests while aligning themselves with a common good or purpose. By contrast, Neuheiser provides a skeptical perspective on the ability of investigative journalism to challenge popular representations of companies and work practices. He examines the relationship between two “Burger King” episodes, which in 2014 aired respectively on the popular documentary television program *Team Wallraff* (named after a prominent German journalist who worked with undercover techniques) and the German adaptation of the international reality television show *Undercover Boss*, arguing that the existence of both shows, side by side, essentially undermines the declared educational claim of investigative journalism. While *Team Wallraff* simulates a critical check on societal
problems or inequalities with the application of documentary-style representation of social interactions or the use of undercover operations, the 2014 scandal ultimately reaffirmed neoliberal messages about companies, work, and the relationship between employers and employees. Neuheiser sees a real danger that the exposure of stark abuses by individual managers makes it harder to discuss systemic failures of the economy. The fact that a commercial television channel challenged established public broadcasters in their traditional position of providing critical information adds to the notion that investigative journalism on television fails to make a meaningful impact on the broader public.

Ralph Buchenhorst turns to comedy and Justin Court to a video game as products of mass media. Buchenhorst inspects bold comedic references to the Holocaust, touching on the difficult question of how genocide could be a topic of laughter. He characterizes comedy relating to the Holocaust as an attempt by the third and fourth generations to find alternative ways of commemoration, provided that the punch line’s primary impulse is not antisemitic or plainly revisionist. In this sense, the use of irony and satire in dealing with the Holocaust indicates that the lesson in public commemoration has in fact been internalized, allowing the younger generations to show some diversity in handling even extremely delicate topics. Buchenhorst’s analysis shows that there are some specific German elements of memory politics that cannot be transported to other countries or discussions. In the final article, Court focuses on the medium of video games, which, as elements of popular culture, have a high relevance for younger generations. In his contribution, Court contrasts anxiety concerning military intervention abroad, as an element of contemporary German political discourse, with the recent video game *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), a first-person shooter about a fictional conflict in the Middle East. He illustrates the ways in which the game’s interrogation of unilateral foreign military intervention is refracted through the lens of German political culture—its stakeholders, terms of debate, points of friction, and histories. Court’s study documents how Germany’s notion about restraint in military interventions, as a lesson from its Nazi past and World War II, is mirrored in the game’s mechanics and story.

The diverse disciplinary lenses and the different characters of the selected objects of popular culture assembled in this special issue yield interesting insights into the mechanisms of incorporating German politics and societal issues into fictional stories and entertainment. Germany’s fascist past and its subsequent rebuilding of democracy provide the foundation for satire and comedy as well as specific ways to incorporate questions of military conflict into games. The specific arrangement of cushioning conflicts between
employers and workers is mirrored in feature movies as well as in reality and documentary formats. The particular discussion about nuclear energy that ultimately led to a phasing out of this energy source is reflected in a Netflix mystery series that attracts viewers around the globe. This special issue helps us to understand the complex relationship between popular culture and politics, and reveals how images and representations of Germany are disseminated around the globe through the means of popular culture.

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Notes

3. At the time of writing, the composition of the coalition government that will be formed had not been determined.
5. See “Germany’s New Role in Europe: Perspectives from Outside,” German Politics and Society 38, no. 3 (2020), guest edited by Ireneusz Pawel Karolewski, Julian Pänke, and Jochen Roose.