

CONFLICT

WHAT IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR EDITION 2025



WILLI-EICHLER-
AKADEMIE e.V.



REFLECT EU&US



CULTURE ACADEMY



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TRANSATLANTIC WAVES

November 2024 has not only once again stirred up political scientists in the United States and Germany. All media, traditional and digital, are outdoing each other in analyses and comparisons, with everyone having a field day about the decline of democracy in the world and the divisions between the United States and Europe. Developments in the US are often seen as a portent of later events in Europe. US fashions and trends have certainly had an influence on social movements and foreign policy decisions in Europe in the past. The USA brought emancipatory ideas to a war-torn (Western) European heartland, where the EU, in its early days as a community of values, was primarily oriented towards international economic relations.

This influence basically ran from west to east. In 2007, the FES[1] analysed[2]: “Three events have decisively shaped transatlantic relations in the last two decades: the end of the Cold War in 1989, September 11, 2001, and the beginning of the Iraq war in 2003. The collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe and the “victory” of the Western model made the USA the only remaining superpower in a unipolar world – politically, militarily and economically. In the perception of themselves and others, they became the “indispensable nation”.

This development seems unstoppable. In the July 2023 issue of “Zeit”[3], there is a warning: “... the relative decline of Europe began long before that.” One reason is: “(...) that US technology companies continue to dominate Europe today, with no significant domestic competition. The seven largest tech companies in terms of market capitalization are all based in the United States: Apple, Amazon and Alphabet with the search engine Google, Microsoft and Facebook’s parent company Meta.”[4]

The US-American dominance over Europe continued even when other nations in this world became more proficient and successful in the economic domain and others started imperialistic land-takes against all international laws. While we speak now of a multipolar world, the dependency of Europe to the USA is higher than ever.

According to a study by the European Council of Foreign Relations, Europe is on the way to becoming an American vassal state. “In the last ten years, the EU has become economically, technologically and militarily less

powerful than America,” it says.[5] This was analysed after Russia’s attack on Ukraine, which has frighteningly highlighted the disaster of Europe’s lack of defence readiness - which the USA do not want to continue to support in the future.



It seems to be a law of nature that the waves from the USA come across the Atlantic and Europe absorbs them while we try to keep our heads above water.

Or is this also an image that reinforces self-doubt, which could also be questioned? The peace movement of the 1980s, the rise of ecological awareness, the late but inexorable confrontation with European colonialism – despite all the justified criticism of some inadequate, over-ambitious or inept implementation, have these not also been formative issues that have made their way from Europe to the United States? Which have also contributed to positive developments (disarmament treaties, banning certain weapons systems, developing new forms of propulsion, questioning historical “certainties”, etc.) – questions that we must continue to ask? Even if it sometimes backfires and some people find it difficult to keep up with everything at once. Even if sometimes it feels like we’re going backwards.[6]

Europe is not lagging behind in everything. European life expectancy is higher than that of US citizens. For women, it is 84 years on average in Europe, compared with 79 for men. By contrast, men in the US live for 73 years on average and women for 79, and the gap has



widened in recent years. In the last three years, this is partly due to the coronavirus, but the overall mortality rate remains high. “Deaths from opiates, car accidents and murder have increased. The pandemic has highlighted something that has been true for decades: America is not very good at protecting its citizens. “

Although the USA is the number one economic power, also due to the radical subsidies of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and low energy prices – it is also a politically, economically and socially divided country. Is the USA really doing better, is it always a pioneer?

The Hanns Böckler Foundation published an interesting study in 2024 that suggests a different conclusion: “Germany is ahead in 10 of the [15 a.’s n.] areas examined. The lead is particularly large in terms of the environment, health, safety, work-life balance and equality. The United States is only significantly better off in terms of household income and consumption, but this is mainly due to the longer working year. In addition, poverty is more widespread in the US. The US has a slight advantage in housing conditions and in some areas of education, research and development.”[7]



This is where it becomes clear that developments sometimes have long-term results that bring lasting improvements to societies despite setbacks and disappointments.

In this context, it is also worth following how Europe's push (which is also the subject of heated debate in Germany), to restrain the illimited use of private information by commercial technology companies, to foster the protection of users from cyberbullying, and a legal framework for the use and further development of AI, will ultimately prove unstoppable in the US as well. While some demonize it as a brake on our economic development, others see these trends as an absolutely necessary corrective, also in view of the challenges of a more multipolar world in which digitization currently acts uninhibited.

"From time immemorial, there has been a temptation to try to emulate the United States of America as a model for the European integration process. More often than not, this proves to be more of a hindrance than a help: we should not always look to the past, but go our own way," said Josep Borrell[8].

Nevertheless, we can learn from each other and also benefit from each other's insights. The Ger-

man and American middle classes are very similar, as the DIW already established in 2016.[9]

"From the 1980s to the turn of the millennium, median income rose continuously on both sides of the Atlantic, after which the trend reversed. (...) These figures already suggest what is proven elsewhere: while incomes continue to diverge, a small group is gaining massively, but the majority of the population is losing income in real terms."[10]

Immigrants are the most affected, which is also visible on both sides of the Atlantic. In Germany, conclusions can be drawn from an evaluation by place of birth. The proportion of middle-class people has shrunk most among those who were not born in Germany. In Europe, as in the US, the question of immigration is highly controversial and emotional.

In October 2024, the IMF published a study showing that in the long term, the effects are mainly positive. "Because



a larger population goes hand in hand with higher demand and ultimately a larger labor supply.”[11] Europe reacts on these numbers and tries to find a unified democratic way to deal with migration, in the understanding that the costs of migration are outweighed by these benefits. In the United States, too, especially in the border regions with Mexico, there are voices, especially from farmers, warning against a fundamental ban on immigration from Central and South America. This could well lead to serious bottlenecks in the management of agricultural businesses, and of course many others.

Political efforts in the United States to roll back certain civil liberties, or to curtail proven powers of the judiciary, or to obstruct access to free and equal elections for some groups, immediately provoke reactions in Europe. Some European member states see this as a chance to further their own anti-democratic goals. The majority, and certainly the majority in Germany, views these developments rather critically.

We should not stare like a rabbit at the snake, but proactively and courageously defend our convictions and enter into a combative exchange with the reactionary forces in our own country. The success of some parties in regional elections should shake us up and motivate us to discuss more, and above all to do so in all educational institutions – formal and informal – in all associations and all places where people meet for a common goal.

Loneliness in front of the screen is certainly a transatlantic problem that we must actively counter. But digital projects can also broaden one’s horizons and one’s group of exchange partners. We learned this directly in our Reflect EU&US project. In this edition of our publication “Conflict Culture”, some of the former participants write about what this exchange meant to them personally.

The waves of political events are washing up on both the shores of the United States and Europe. We must not let them overwhelm us. We must continue to build bridges.



I wish you enjoyable reading

Best regards

SUSANNE DRAKE
WILLI EICHLER AKADEMIE BRUSSELS

[1] Friedrich Ebert Foundation

[2] <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/04598.pdf>

[3] <https://www.zeit.de/wirtschaft/2023-07/usa-europa-wirtschaftswachstum-wohlstand-lebensstandard-lebenserwartung/seite-2>

[4] Ibid.

[5] <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-art-of-vassalisation-how-russias-war-on-ukraine-has-transformed-transatlantic-relations/>

[6] <https://www.marktundmittelstand.de/zukunftsmärkte/studie-zur-sterblichkeit-in-den-usa>

[7] <https://www.boeckler.de/de/pressemitteilungen-2675-vergleich-deutschland-usa-10-von-15-wichtigen-kenngrößen-besser-55922.htm>
IMK-Study Nr. 91, Januar 2024 Jan Prieue: Comparing living and working conditions – Germany outperforms the United States

[8] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/die-vereinigten-staaten-und-europa-geschichte-ist-nicht-vergleichbar_de

[9] <https://www.wiwo.de/politik/deutschland/deutschlands-mittelschicht-schwindet-in-richtung-amerikanischer-verhältnisse/13551592.html>

[10] <https://www.fr.de/wirtschaft/studie-zeigt-migration-lässt-die-eu-wirtschaft-wachsen-93362001.html>

[11] Ibid.

Having grown up in the US, with family roots in the German Ruhr area, Kai Heidemann now teaches and researches at Maastricht University in the Netherlands. His research focuses on the link between social movements and processes of educational reform and change. He has recently published the edited volume "Combating Crises from Below: Social responses to Polycrisis in Europe" with Maastricht University Press.

THE TRUMP-CRISIS

WEA: *Given your interest in crises, what kind of crisis do you think the second Trump victory in the US, where you grew up, and victories of other far-right leaders like Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, signify?*

H: They are a sign of a crisis of our democratic institutions, to which I would count the educational sector. You might put these under the banner of progressive causes, but for anyone interested in the expansion of democratic citizenship, pluralism, diversity, and inclusion, which to me are basic democratic values, these victories are very worrisome, because they are seen as a threat by the far-right. A lot of the far-right's bread and butter is presenting half the population, in the US's case, as domestic enemies – the woke social justice mob, feminazis, cultural Marxists. All these labels are the new bogeyman of the right, and we as educators get placed in these boxes. We do need to worry. I mean, we can see very clearly that the current government in the Netherlands has made an attack against higher education. They proposed a one-billion-euro budget cut in a time when corporate wealth in the Netherlands is at its historic highest. So, when you see the far-right attacking especially higher education in this way, it is because they see education as a threat. This might over-simplify things, and I'm sure people on the right won't like to hear this, but ignorance is the biggest resource for a lot of these far-right movements. Exploring the roots of inequality, and the causes of discrimination – this is very inconvenient knowledge for people in these far-right groups, so they don't want to be funding this type of thing. And the other response I would give, is that it is a crisis on the left. People are worried about housing, about the cost of living, and for some reason, they are not looking to the left anymore to address these issues. I think Bernie Sanders, in the US's case, had quite a clear diagnosis from the get-go. Both the Clinton and Harris campaigns fell flat because they were basically elitist candidates in a populist moment. At least in the US, this is especially true, and it is probably more and more the case in Europe as well. The left is not seen as trustworthy, they are seen as elitist, and perhaps more part of the problem than part of the solution. And that

is going to require some serious soul-searching on the part of the left.

WEA: *Can you take me to the moment of the Trump victory? How was the mood in your classroom the day after?*

H: Compared to the first time Trump won, I felt that there was very little reaction. And this was also my response. The first time we were all shocked, but the second time, we knew that it was a possibility. I was just disappointed. Do you know this Marx quote about how history repeats itself – "The first time as a tragedy, the second time as a farce"? Well, I think the Trump victory is the opposite actually: The first time it was a farce, now it's a tragedy. People are resigned to it.

WEA: *Something you touch upon in your research is the term political education. Can you perhaps explain what the term means to you?*

H: I think the term has at least two meanings. On the one hand, it is just learning about politics and how government works: What are your rights, what are your responsibilities. I had a very interesting moment with a Belgian organisation doing workshops on taxes and taxation. You would think: "Taxes, that is super boring, right?" – Yeah, but it is actually really relevant, because it is how government is funded, and how government redistributes wealth. So that is one form of political education. And then there is something that could be called politicised education, where the term is used pejoratively for education that is weaponised in the service of some social change project. For example, the far-right accuse a lot of the adult education sector for being too political, too left-wing. And in a sense, they are right: The origins of adult education stem from the labour movement. It's in their DNA. But that doesn't have to be a bad thing. If the point of adult education is to help people combat social problems like racism, climate issues, sexism, unemployment, whatever it is, then yes, adult education is doing politics, because of course these problems are



all wrapped up in some kind of power dynamic, and we are asking people to empower themselves in the face that. And a lot of the civic goals of adult education are about promoting democratisation and participation in the democratic process. That's political too, and that's a good thing.

WEA: *So a politically neutral adult education does not exist? Would that even be something to aim for?*

H: The claim of neutrality is the most political statement you can make. The moment someone says that they are neutral, you can be sure that “Ok, here comes the ideology”. And this is used in debates around civic education, like, “they’re political, not us!”. Here in the Netherlands, the government completely destroyed the tradition of civic education that had been in place and replaced it with this very economic utilitarian type of adult education which is basically just about integrating

people into the labour market. If you tell me that that is not political, then I call bullshit. But they will say: “no it’s natural! The point of education is training skills to help people meet the demands of the labour market”. And of course, if this is how you define adult education, then that is what it becomes. But then you have torn off the civic, democratising aspect of education, and that is a political manoeuvre.

WEA: *So what, do you believe, is the far-right view of adult education?*

H: For the far-right, education seems to be primarily about cultural assimilation and meeting the demands of the labour market. The schools and universities do what the labour market needs. And for now, that is STEM – “we don’t need arts and sociology. We need engineers to compete with China and India”.



WEA: *And how does civic education fit into this?*

H: I am not sure that the far-right believes in civic education in the democratising sense at all. Generally, the far-right tends to be pretty cosy with capital. That is why they will always ally with the liberals. That is why the liberals will always ally with the fascists as opposed to the socialists, because socialists have a more threatening view of what social institutions should do: promoting equality and narrowing the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

WEA: *What then is the role of educators in addressing the far-right when it is in power?*

H: Educators need to maintain a very critical look at what is going on in government. And we need to work with our students to maintain this critical examination, because I think that this way, a lot of the misconceptions, myths, and sometimes outright bullshit that got these people elected can be exposed. One of the most fundamental things we need to look at are the values and morals of these parties, and the consequences of the policies and ideas they put forth, because that is not necessarily happening in the news media people are consuming. So to me, the role of educators in this situation is very much about a kind of civic vigilance. There's this French term, "souveillance" – a kind of vigilance from below. Surveillance is the powerful over-

looking the masses for the purpose of social control; surveillance is the way in which the public keeps an eye on the powerful. And that is what we need a lot of at the moment. And education, particularly in the social sciences, can play a key role here. I think we need to mobilise this kind of attitude now more than ever, which creates a real challenge for educators in terms of how willing they are to step up, to mobilise their role, and to potentially put themselves into the spotlight. Doing this kind of critical work can get you into real trouble in more conservative contexts. The current developments in Europe really remind me of how I was teaching in the US. There, I had to be much more careful about the way I was approaching topics like inequality. For example, I would ask in class, “ok, what are the effects of this particular policy? Let’s look at it. And if we are concerned about equality in education, then let’s look at the way privatisation policies or austerity will affect education. I’ll hypothesise that they probably won’t have a very good effect on educational attainment of working-class people. So, let’s do the research and investigate this”. This is one step. But then you need to go beyond the ivory tower of academia and connect with communities and insert yourself into the public sphere, and not all educators are willing to do that. That is really a different breed of educators. And adult educators are particularly well-suited for that role I believe.

WEA: *And what about educators working with young people, for example in high school?*

H: I used to work in High School, and that’s a very challenging context to be in: overcrowded classrooms, tremendous bureaucratic regulations, strict parameters that you are forced to work in. That is a very difficult space to do critical work, because you often lack the autonomy and the time, but of course there are good stories out there of high school teachers mobilising students. So on the one hand, it is really hard, but there is also so much potential, so much energy. You can see that with the Fridays for Future protest. I mean, mobilised high school students for a cause, when was the last time we saw that? Kids have strong emotions, and they have strong thoughts about the world they are entering into and inheriting.

WEA: *For a last question: Reading your book “Combating Crises from Below”, you can almost get a kind of hopeful vision of crisis, because in meeting crisis, local actors often show a lot of innovation, agency, solidarity. Do you think that there is such a hopeful reading of the current moment in education?*

H: It might be a bit early to say that, but there is hope. Hopefully under the conditions that are now being created, it will create solidarity. As a guy studying social movements, people studying this are calling it the positive impacts of repression. Repression per definition is

bad, like a crisis, but in these tough times, it can bring people together and strengthen peoples’ commitment to things. In the Netherlands, for example, under the current government’s austerity measures, and its’ xenophobic anti-internationalization policies, the whole sector of higher education organised a protest. And the whole sector has been trying to exert itself. How effectively is a question for another time, but I think that that’s a great example of that people saying, “this will not stand”. That’s where solidarity and resistance can come from. We will really have to get creative, but I believe that the whole educational sector, not just university teachers, will have to start rallying. Building bridges between higher education, adult education, secondary education, et cetera is going to be really important. We are in a moment of long-term right-wing ascendance, and we know what the right-wing project is: defunding, privatisation, marketisation, and assimilation. Together, the educational sector is going to be much more powerful and able to defend itself against all of this.

KAI HEIDEMANN



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Between anti-immigration politics and support for immigrants: How conservative parties in the US and Germany are gaining strength



America! What comes to mind when you think of America? The land of freedom, dreams and endless opportunities for those who leave their homeland to seize new chances and promises of success? America! The country where people from all over the world come together and live under one roof: The American Dream? America! The country where your skin color, your language or your name are “not an obstacle to success”[1], as Barack Obama said during his 2004 election campaign?

However, this year's election has shown that America is deeply divided – a country full of contradictions and political, economic and social upheaval. These developments not only affect Americans locally, but also have an impact on the US's international relations. Migrants are particularly affected. In line with his campaign promises, Trump wants to deport them with the

help of the largest deportation program in the country's history[2], in order to rid America of 'criminals'[3]. However, it remains questionable whether Trump is actually only targeting offenders or whether he is aiming for a broader expulsion of migrants.

Why is the situation of migrants in the US relevant for Germany? For one thing, we are seeing an increase in hostility towards foreigners and racism against certain groups in the US and in Europe, particularly in Germany. For another, it is clear that not only white voters support Trump's policies. Although 55 percent of Trump voters were white, 48 percent of Latinx voters, 50 percent of Asian voters, and 17 percent of African American voters also voted for Trump.[4] The situation is similar in Germany, where the AfD is increasingly winning votes not only from Germans without a migration background but also from Germans with a migration background.

But why do people with a migration background opt for conservative parties whose programs often include restrictive measures? A similar pattern can be seen in the US and Germany: many people with a migration background come from conservative societies in which religious and cultural values are deeply rooted. These values influence their views on issues such as (trans)gender, (homo)sexuality or their treatment in schools. The conservative stance of parties such as the AfD and the Republicans on these issues could appeal to these groups and thus encourage them to identify with their programs.

Another factor is dissatisfaction with the current government. In the US, high inflation rates and rising living costs weighed on people. Trump skillfully used this economic discontent to strengthen his position. Similar dynamics were also observed in Germany: An October 2023 poll showed that 68 percent of respondents were dissatisfied with the traffic light coalition. [5] The economic situation was also criticized and negatively assessed by 80 percent of respondents. [6] The ongoing conflicts within the government ultimately led to the dissolution of the coalition on November 6, 2024. Chancellor Olaf Scholz plans to put the vote of confidence in January 2025 – a signal that the political landscape could change significantly in the upcoming new elections. The AfD is likely to continue to gain in importance.

However, the decision of people with a migration background to vote for conservative parties may not result from dissatisfaction with the government alone. There may also be a negative attitude towards new migration movements within groups with a history of migration. This aspect is often closely linked to the desire to identify with German society. To emphasize their sense of belonging, some distance themselves from other migrant groups and may vote for parties like the AfD to show how 'German' they are. After all, in times of crisis and political disagreement, people tend to cling to the familiar and known. They do not respond to crises by seeking change or embracing the new and unknown. Rather, they seek support and stability – something they can only find by believing in the familiar. Both the AfD in Germany and Trump's party in the US follow

a similar concept: they advocate the preservation of traditional values, norms and structures. They promote the idea that societal problems are caused by the foreign and the unknown and claim that these problems can only be solved if those who do not fit into this system of values and norms are excluded. Consequently, people with and without a migration background who find themselves in individual crisis situations may feel understood and addressed by the electoral promises of the AfD and the Republicans. This can lead to them developing a stronger tendency towards national identity and patriotism.

BIRIM YILDIZ



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[1] Barack Obama's 2004 DNC speech. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgGO7ARzU9U&t=148s>.

[2] "On Day One, I will launch the largest deportation program in American history to get the criminals out", Trump said at his Madison Square Garden rally on Oct. 28". <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2024-12-09/4-day-one-promises-from-president-elect-donald-trump>.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Figures taken from a BBC News statistic. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy4nyg9vl3no>.

[5] Survey: Satisfaction with traffic lights at a new low. https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/parteien/id_100062608/umfrage-zu-friedenheit-mit-ampel-erreicht-neuen-tiefpunkt.html.

[6] Ibid.

QUEER COMMUNITIES

in a Divided Society

December 2024



Disembodiment:
„A state of feeling
dissociated from
one's body and
mind.“

Election Day: November 5, 2024. Donald J. Trump is declared the projected winner and the President-Elect of the United States of America.

After Trump was announced the winner, the queer community held its breath in collective grief. A sense of nervous anticipation filled the air; the presidential transfer of power in January loomed large. How many trans Americans will flee as political refugees? What countries will create safe havens for them? As we prepare for an administration that campaigned on demonizing, scapegoating, and blaming trans people for society's ills, we prepare for forced disembodiment—manifested in a violent, systematic detachment from a world that seeks to erase our existence.

The political events of this day—the U.S. election and the German government's upheaval—marked a turning point, resonating far beyond borders. These outcomes reflect a troubling resurgence of reactionary politics, where moral panic becomes the go-to tool for consolidating power.

Moral Panic and Reactionary Movements

Our society is caught in the grip of a moral panic—a tactic designed to distract people and sow division. Trans people, immigrants, and other marginalized

groups are being cast as villains, blamed for problems we didn't create. These reactionary movements feed on lies, twisting the truth to keep us in the cycle of fear and scapegoating.

Recently, we visited the Musée de la Civilisation in Québec City, where an exhibit, *Wrestling: Québec in the Ring*, transformed the museum into a surreal arena. One section recreated Madison Square Garden—six men locked in combat inside a stadium that was part real, part illusion. Mirrors and clever lighting turned upturned egg cartons into a roaring crowd. The exhibit offered an unsettling parallel to the political spectacle we're living through now. Madison Square Garden isn't just a space of illusion—it has also been the stage for real rallies, including a particularly telling one for Trump in 2024. How many layers of illusion does it take to convince people they are surrounded by cheering supporters? This is the essence of moral panic: the construction of an “enemy” amplified by the illusion of widespread agreement. Whether in the wrestling ring or the political arena, the crowd's roar is often manufactured—and the harm it incites is very real.

Further into the museum exhibit, a sign asked: *Quelle liberté veut-on pour nos enfants?*—What freedom do we wish for our children? The question stays with us. It's not just about freedom for children—it's about what kind of world we are leaving behind. For queer people, freedom isn't an abstract ideal; it's a fight for survival, for joy, and for the right to exist fully.

For those of us in the queer community, these illusions manifest as disembodiment—the disconnection from a society that casts us as scapegoats in its relentless pursuit of power. The political spectacle demands new adversaries to keep the show going, and trans people are its latest target.

A Call to Resilience

We need programs and spaces that bring us together now more than ever—places where we can learn resilience, build connections, and push back against the forces trying to divide us. The queer community has al-



ways been a source of creativity and resistance. It's time to amplify those strengths and reclaim our future.

Organizations like the Reflect EU & US Program, Willi-Eichler-Akademie and Queer Joy Collective remind us of what is possible when we invest in education, dialogue, and community-building. These programs create spaces where people can connect across divides, learn from one another, and build solidarity in the face of growing hostility. Now is the time to support and expand initiatives like these to ensure no one is left behind.

To every trans person reading this: we see you. Your existence matters. Your dreams matter. Even when it feels like the world wants to erase you, you are loved. We're with you in this fight.

To those in power: empathy and accountability aren't optional. Meet with us. Listen to us. Stop debating our right to exist.

To allies: your silence isn't neutrality—it's complicity. Speak up. Stand with us, not just quietly, but loudly. Use your voice to challenge transphobia and the hatred it fuels. Together, we can rewrite the story—one that centers connection, care, and justice.

The United States, Germany, and societies around the world are at a breaking point. Standing by while fas-

cism takes root is not an option. The time to act is now. Together, we can tear down the illusions built to divide us and build a future where no one has to fight to prove they deserve to exist.

SEBASTIAN & CORAL CRISSEY



MAINE

Personal Reflection about the impact of the Trump presidency on transatlantic relations



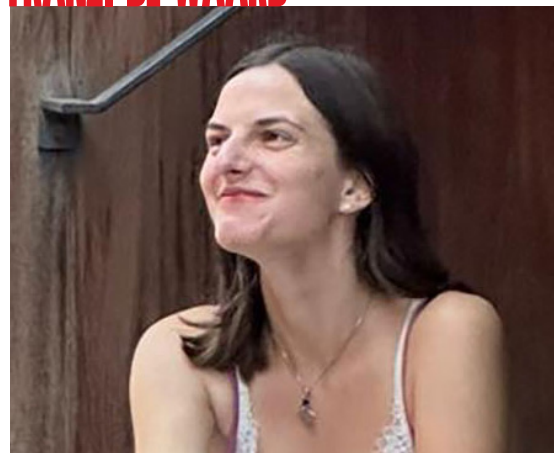
The result of the 2024 United States presidential election came as a surprise to many Europeans. However, Trump's second victory can be traced back to several decades of economic, political, and social developments, leading up to the identity crisis the nation currently appears to be grappling with. To me, the United States seems caught between the desire for economic growth and conservative values versus the push for a more inclusive and humane society. People are scared to lose their livelihoods, trust in the federal government has been declining since the decades following the 1970s, and most Americans seem willing to support someone who challenges established norms and claims to address their insecurities.

While many Americans celebrate Trump's victory and see it as a chance to avert everyday hardships, many people, among them many of my friends, show a deep concern for the election's results, as they fear potential threats to their fundamental human rights and job security. Personally, I'm afraid to see what Trump's victory might mean for the extreme right in Europe. Right-wing parties are rising to power everywhere around us, and I'm sure a Trump victory will encourage and embolden parties that are still looking to increase their strength. I know many Europeans take great pride in saying that European countries could not replicate the United States' political dynamics, but I'm unsure. We're in a crucial phase of American history right now, and how the country will decide to

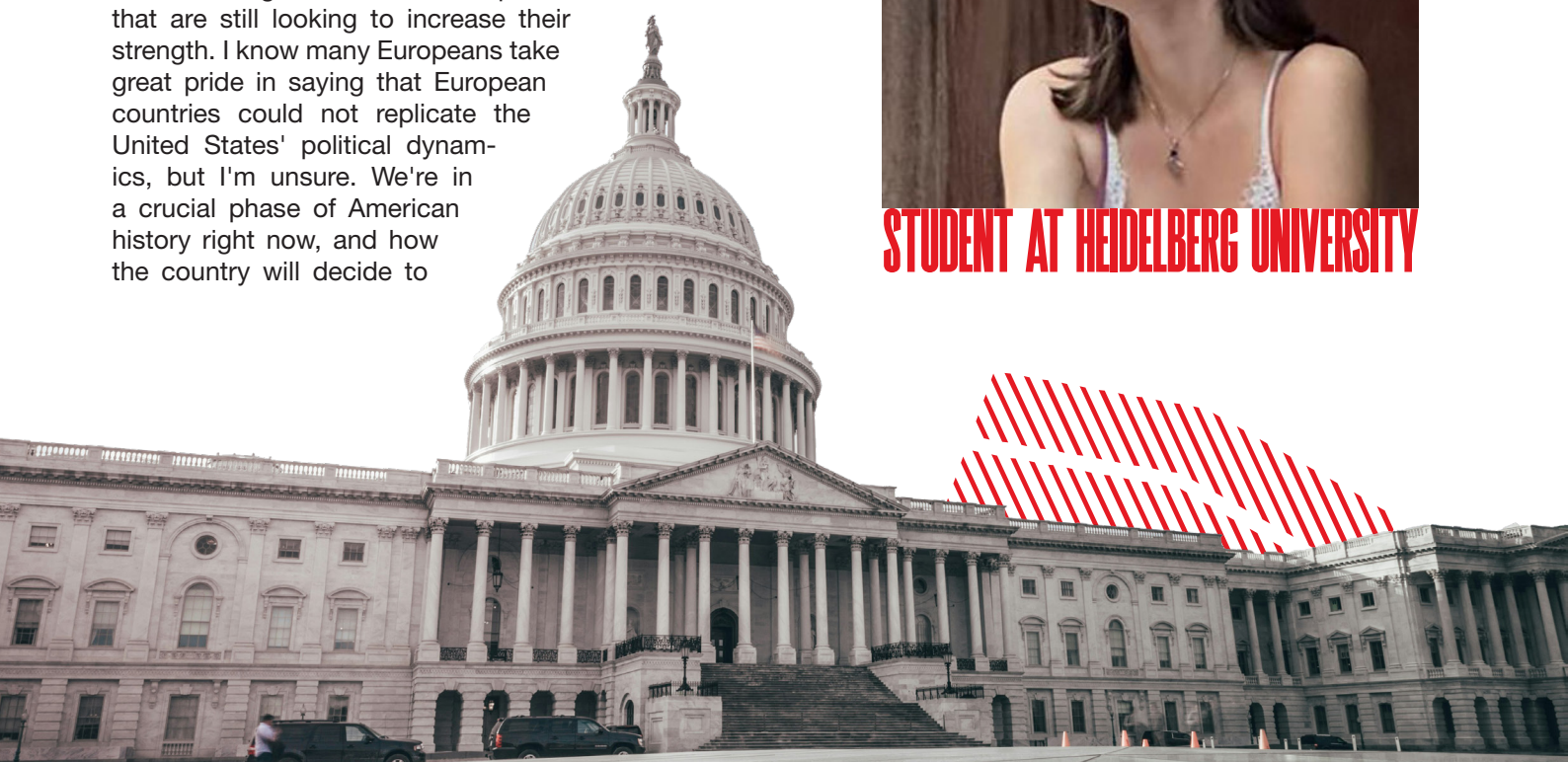
move forward will have an effect beyond its borders. As a European American Studies student, I think it is important that we continue to observe and analyze the US, look for the parallels in our own culture and political situation, and learn from current events.

Trump's win has increased my skepticism about the future. Besides what his victory might mean for transatlantic relations or global politics in general, his disregard for climate change will affect us all. While it remains uncertain how many of Trump's campaign promises will be realized and how many changes he can implement, it sure promises to be an interesting next few years for the United States. My curiosity about the nation has definitely received a new spark.

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TAMING THE TINDER

Over the past few years, the strong transatlantic culture built by the United States and Europe has been turned into a tinderbox that threatens to disconnect our relationship. At the heart of any culture is its constant evolution, and we've come to take this change for granted. The results of the US elections have only heightened fear and anxiety in Europe, further testing our 'special' relationship. Alongside Trump, authoritarian populist leaders in Europe have gained ground, with centrist parties increasingly aligning with populist rhetoric—particularly on issues like migration and climate policy.

The theme of "tinder" has been strikingly relevant in recent months. Right now, Los Angeles is literally a tinderbox, facing one of the most devastating and expensive wildfires in history. Meanwhile, Mark Zuckerberg recently announced a controversial policy shift on Facebook—rolling back fact-checking, while positioning the US as a beacon of free expression against Europe's growing censorship laws.

Then there's the aftershock of the US election and the rise of far-right movements across Europe. After the election, many Americans experienced collective exhaustion, a mix of fear, frustration, and grief. We were tired of fighting, resisting, fearing, hoping. Almost out of shame, we didn't want to talk about it. The conversation quickly shifted from simply asking, "Why did Trump win?" to questioning why the Democrats lost again. Despite still feeling stumped as to why someone can't see past the wizard's curtain, there have been truly astute, soul-searching analysis

asking not only the question, à la Hillary Clinton, "What happened?" but also, What did we do wrong? What are the reasons for our crumbling democracy? How can we do better? One thing has become clear: the problem isn't just about the far-right but about our collective failure to truly listen—to the fears, values, and concerns of others.

As an anthropologist, I've long argued that to understand geopolitics, we need to consider not just nation-states but the citizens and non-citizens who shape power dynamics. In studying far-right actors, I initially focused on their digital strategies and language, but I came to realize that understanding the far-right wasn't enough. I committed a cardinal anthropological sin. I gave in to the false dichotomy of who is considered right and who is considered left, and failed to take seriously what the people immediately around me were saying. I fell into the polarized narrative trap that assumes there is a true dichotomy between right and left, liberal and conservative.

The real issue lies in how we, across the political spectrum, have failed to listen—to those who don't share our views and to the deep-seated anxieties shaping their decisions. Laphonza Butler, former California Senator, aptly put it: "Democrats... must stop talking and start listening. Really listening." [1] We've been so focused on the binary of right versus left that we failed to hear what others are truly saying. This failure to listen is one reason why Trump, and others like him, gained power. The rising cost of living, for example, has become a significant issue. Despite claims that inflation is under control, many people still feel financially strained. The cost of living, for example, has been for many overwhelming and arguments explaining Biden's role in stemming higher inflation have become untenable: "Despite the headline statistics trumpeted by the Democrats,





or the barely manifested results of President Joe Biden's industrial policies, the ongoing reality of inflation and the unequal conditions in daily life could not be masked.”[2] Statistics do not win elections. In a recent interview, the former White House Chief of Staff under President Obama, Rahm Emanuel, expressed many reasons for the Democratic Party's loss but the main reason is this: we focused on pushing data rather than emotions and values.

Democrats, and European policymakers alike, have a communication problem—they're speaking in data-heavy, abstract terms, while Republicans (and far-right populists) speak directly to emotions with simple, decisive lan-

guage. When crime rates go down but citizens still feel unsafe, for example, statistics don't offer reassurance. If people are still worried about rising crime, they are not walking around saying, "You know what? I feel 22 percent safer in 2024 than I did in 2023." [3] People are struggling. Whether that is a reality or delusional perception doesn't really matter. As the question often goes, "Do you want a relationship or do you want to be right?" The Democrats want to be right.

Social media has played a major role in this shift. Those who support Trump or far-right leaders often bypass traditional media, using platforms like TikTok and YouTube to speak directly to voters. These platforms are designed to capture attention by showing the most sensational content—whether or not people agree with or like it. This 'attention economy' reinforces simplistic, emotionally-charged political messaging and helps create an international far-right coalition, unified by similar rhetoric delivered through the same channels.

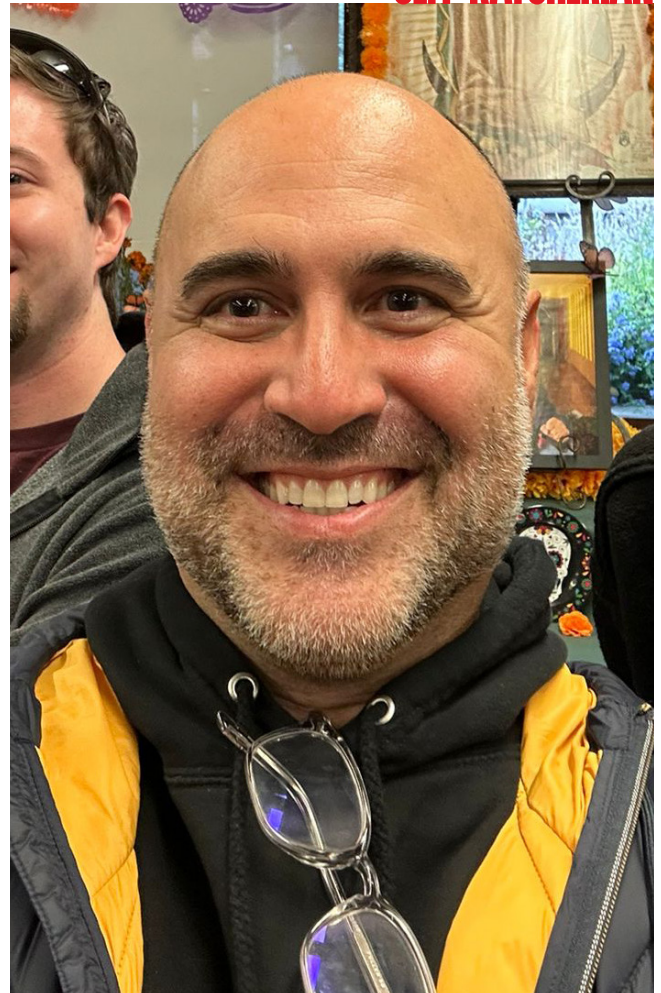
In this way, digital technology makes voting decisions easier by framing the act of voting like choosing a date on Tinder. Their default is to continuously swipe left until someone stands out and grabs their attention. They don't know the person apart from their basic profile, but they are different and 'authentic'. They swipe right and it's a match! The act of choosing a candidate is easy, mindless, and appeals to our fears to truly engage with other people.

This is where the real challenge lies. Disinformation is rampant, and the way we interact with each other—and with politics—is increasingly mediated by digital technologies. Our relationships are shaped by social media, which in turn shapes our views on democracy itself. This isn't just a problem between the far-right and far-left—it's a broader human issue. Distrust in government is widespread, and it's rooted in legitimate concerns—whether it's inflation, climate change, or the immigration crisis. These issues matter to people on all sides of the political spectrum. The problem is, there are not many alternative spaces for meaningful disagreement or dialogue.

To preserve democracy, we need spaces where people can engage in productive conversations and practice deliberation—not just vote. As Nathan Gardels and Nicolas Berggruen argue, we need "participation without populism," especially as representative de-

mocracy loses its legitimacy in the face of social media's "siloed virality." [4] Initiatives like Reflect EU&US are essential because they create spaces for citizens on both sides of the Atlantic to engage with one another, to discuss critical issues, and to disagree constructively. These spaces offer a way to talk with—not at—each other, and in doing so, can help quell the firestorms of discontent and division. Like controlled burns that clear the underbrush to prevent larger wildfires, these forms of deliberative democracy can help mend our fractured relationships through unmediated forms of communication and protect the health of our political systems.

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[1] <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/04/us/politics/laphonza-butler-biden-harris.html>

[2] <https://www.noemamag.com/illiberal-democracy-comes-to-america/>

[3] <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/03/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-rahm-emanuel.html>

[4] <https://www.noemamag.com/illiberal-democracy-comes-to-america/>

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