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Why so antisocial? Football ultras, crowd modalities, and atmospherics of discontent in public space

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Abstract

As some of the most intensively devoted football fans in Germany, ultras coordinate crowd atmosphere in the arena to support their respective clubs on the field while actively positioning themselves against sport's governing bodies, whom they see as corrupted by the strategies used to transform professional football from a game into a capitalist industry. Focusing on travel and transportation as a key feature of hardcore fandom, I examine the relationship between ultras' activities in transit to games and their congregation in public spaces (on the streets, on trains, at rest stops, in stadia), in which quotidian ambience is often hijacked and repurposed as an estranged form of public address. I focus on the dynamic ways that ultras move through space as a means of charting the stages in which fan scenes become crowds, and crowds are mobilized as a means of protesting against the alienating dynamics of modern football, the contrasting stylistics of which result in divergent outsider interpretations and reactions from the state, the German Football Association (DFB), the media, and onlookers confronted by ultras' public transgressions. Through the fan scene's ability to coordinate movement and heighten bodily capacity, varied expressions of antisocial behavior become a means of harnessing fans' own disaffection in a way that reclaims public space as it conjures a heightened emotive environment.

Keywords: ultras; football; atmosphere; affect; subculture

Introduction

Surrounded by flashing police vans and riot police, close to 2,500 of SC Dynamo Dresden's hardcore football fans marched tightly packed together in the streets toward the Wildparkstadion in Karlsruhe for a football game against Karlsruher SC in 2017. Without enough tickets for entry, the supporters had traveled over 500 kilometers for the game to protest the German Football Association (DFB), who had radically reduced the ticket allotment as a punitive measure in response to the fans' use of illegal pyrotechnics at a prior match (Faszination Fankurve 2017a). Calling

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themselves *ultras*, these fans are some of the most dedicated and least compliant supporters of their respective teams, often using pyrotechnics as an expression of passion for their respective clubs and defiance against the state and sport's governing bodies. Taking issue with the DFB's decision to broadly punish *all* supporters regardless of their personal involvement in the illegal action, the ultras responded by hitting the streets of Karlsruhe dressed in camouflage shirts, bucket hats, and painted faces while carrying a banner that reads "KRIEG DEM DFB" ("War against the DFB"). Marching to militaristic drum patterns through thick billowing smoke amidst the jarring blasts of firecrackers, the crowd stormed the visitor sector of the stadium without tickets and hung a banner along the terrace wall: "FOOTBALL ARMY DYNAMO DRESDEN."[1]

Figure 1. Dynamo Dresden Ultras in Wildpark Stadium after storming the gates.
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While ultras' coordination of crowd action is first and foremost conceived of by its participants as a means of supporting the players on the field and positively influencing the outcome of the game, the stylistics and affective heights produced by the crowd also reflect a broader disillusion with the state of professional sport. As the most intensively invested fans of their respective clubs, ultras attend all of their teams' games, home and away, in what amounts to a lifestyle that revolves around the collectivity of the group. Regarding their own sporting bodies as corrupted by the strategies officials employ to transform professional football from a game into a capitalist resource, ultras leverage core critiques of the rising cost of ticket prices, a lack of fan representation within sport's governing bodies, and the replacement of standing terraces with seats. The criticisms voiced by ultras stem fundamentally from a perceived lack of self-determination amidst rapid changes to professional

[1]The fan march can be seen at BILD 2017.

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sport, which for the hardcore fans is still idealized as *Volkssport* – the people's game. Viewed by the state and the DFB primarily as "problem fans," ultras are paradoxically also the culture bearers of the football club, providing cultural capital for their teams as they drastically improve the atmosphere of the sporting event (Jack 2024). Often denigrated as hooligans, ultras' varied and ambivalent relationship to physical violence is frequently construed as a defining feature of the lifestyle in popular culture and news media.[2] As I argue elsewhere (Jack 2024), governmentality from various state departments, sport governing bodies, and even nonprofit organizations with competing and conflicting philosophies around how to mitigate ultras' potential create a highly contested political terrain in the stadium space. Defined by conflict and fraught encounters, ultras' lifeworlds are flooded with riot police, security personnel, intensive surveillance, full-time social workers working the football "beat," negative press coverage on "fan violence," as well as heavy-handed disciplinary measures such as fines and stadium-bans issued by the DFB for crimes such as graffiti and the use of pyrotechnics.

At the same time for the administrators of football clubs, ultras are a valuable if unwieldy facet of the matchday experience, heightening the spectacle of the sporting event in the stadium and boosting the authenticity of the team to a potential global fan (and consumer) base. However, as teams find innovative ways to compete for the best athletic talent across the globe, they also require additional financial strategies to compete with their adversaries on the field. These intertwined prerogatives have changed the ways that football is consumed and fandom is practiced, shifting from in-person spectatorship toward mass TV broadcasting and mediated spectatorship (Jack 2021, 2024; Kennedy and Kennedy 2016; Webber 2017). Nuhrat (2018) points to the political economic transformation occurring in professional football, which revolves around the negotiation of massive player salaries, the pivotal role of merchandising for revenue production, and the transformation of the stadium space into sites of advertisement and consumption – all of which have coincided with the transition of professional clubs into publicly traded corporations. At times even extending past a logic of pure profitability, teams have increasingly been used by billionaires as vehicles for furthering broad geopolitical and capitalist influence outside of sport, as evidenced most recently by the Saudi Super League whose teams have drawn some of football's most famous superstars to the once little-known league.

With material consequences in the arena, the conversion of standing terraces to seats is one crucial departure from older stadium design that makes more revenue for football clubs but is also an impediment to the ultras' style of fandom, which is predicated on standing, jumping, and waving flags. When contrasted with the ultras congregating behind the goal, the more casual fans who sit in the seated sections of the stadium and attend several games a year are perceived as consumers of football as a leisure event rather than participants in a niche lifestyle. During my two years of ethnographic field research at FC Union Berlin, the production of atmosphere for

[2]While there is a connection between ultras and violence, many groups have little interest in any kind of fighting or vandalism. In Germany, my interlocutor Sal pointed out that it is only when violence occurs that the activities of ultras are considered newsworthy, which has the effect of representing violence as a key feature of their activities in the public sphere.

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ultras was considered antithetical to consumptive practices – it was a *proactive and productive* form of fandom. In contrast, my interlocutor Ali built an archetype of what he saw as the normative consumer fan for me – someone who attended one game a year, bought food, sat in the seated area, and took selfies – all forms of passivity that took spectators out of the moment and dampened the atmosphere. Moreover, on-field success was considered secondary to the preservation and self-determination of what was referred to as the "fan scene" – the milieu of hardcore fans that attended all the games, home and away, and always participated in crowd support.[3] It was a common opinion amongst ultras that financially motivated decisions accrued more revenue for the club but that this often came at the expense of the hardcore fan experience.[4] In this context, ultra is not only a style of crowd support but can also be envisioned as a reaction to the state of what participants call "modern football"; it is a radical re-invention of "traditional fandom," revamped to contest the commercial and ideological priorities of professional football clubs, broadcasters, sponsors, and sport's governing bodies such as the DFB (Jack 2024).[5]

Populist impulse and institutional dissent

As such, I frame the ultra movement here as a style and ethos of crowd support emergent from the transnational circulation and creative appropriation of fan chants (Achondo 2022), as well as a backlash to the changes in the political economy of professional sport, its governance, and the accompanying shifts in mainstream fan praxis at large (Gabler 2013). In so doing, I point toward ultras as a case study in which populist logics of dissent and institutional disillusion have permutuated outside of institutionalized politics altogether. Like many populist movements that rely heavily on affective, embodied, and material forms of political engagement (Cody 2015; Mazzarella 2019; Mouffe 2022; Samet 2019), ultras co-opt the identity of "The People" by asserting themselves vis-à-vis the kinetics of the crowd as the true culture bearers of the teams they follow. Formulating a cohesive commentary across immense cultural difference and contrasting political orientations (Samet 2019), ultra as a transnational movement actively defies politeness and respectability

[3]Participants in the fan scene may not all explicitly identify as ultras, but they have a similar mentality in regards to consistent attendance and often travel with the ultras to away games and stand near them in the arena.

[4]In 2016, when Union Berlin was on the brink of being promoted from the second to the first division of the Bundesliga, the ultras presented a banner that read, "Shit, we're going up . . . " From my conversations with the ultras, the banner was meant to express both excitement and a fear of what might happen to the fan experience in conjunction with the club's competitive success.

[5]Several high-profile disasters in the 1970s in which fans were crushed on standing terraces initiated a major shift in the football spectator experience toward all-seater stadiums. The mass installation of seats in place of standing terraces confines the range of action and emotions that spectators can exercise, thus changing how fans assemble, coordinate, and express themselves in public space. As these changes in sport were occurring, scholars from the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies argued that through their commoditization, professional sporting events were increasingly being redesigned as forms of bourgeois leisure that encouraged more passive modes of viewership and consumption, similar to other leisure activities like theater or cinema (Clarke 1973; Critcher 1979; Taylor 1971). In conjunction with a transition to seated stadia, rising ticket prices have made consistent in-person attendance in places like the UK financially impossible—a trend that ultras in Germany view as an ongoing threat to their spectator-based fandom.

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as a stylistic feature of its critiques against sport's commercialization and the institutions that have created what the fans see as the dystopic landscape of modern football. Casting aside the charismatic leadership characteristic of many populist movements (Kazin 1998), the collective cultivation of sound and sensorium through the crowd articulates an antisystemic dimension of sociality that retains a populist ethos across ultra scenes in Europe. Populism – much like football – coalesces around feelings of togetherness and belonging (Kazin 1998; Patch 2019). In the case of football fandom, ultra and populist affect align through an erosion of faith in institutions' capacity to effectively represent those that it governs (Kazin 1998; Mazzarella 2019; Patch 2019). Ultra fandom instrumentalizes intense camaraderie and affective ties to voice explicit critiques in fleeting moments of protest through "a discourse of superiority" aimed at authority (Patch 2019 : 47), even as the movement – largely white and male – lives with its own fundamental contradictions around issues of inclusivity and belonging.[6] In situations that briefly garner mainstream media attention such as Dynamo's "War against the DFB" protest, the DFB's ensuing performance of listening to criticism becomes a strategy of governance that acts in lieu of any substantive shift in policy (Raheja 2022).

From a disciplinary perspective, William Mazzarella (2019 : 46) has also noted that cultural anthropology has long incorporated populist dimensions both ideologically and methodologically in its attempts to foreground "the common sense of the common people" toward a critique of power and hierarchy – which also informs my ethnographic imperative to expand on the experiences and critical commentary of my interlocutors here in this essay. Research across anthropology and cultural studies has previously explored hardcore football fandom as a working-class phenomenon operating in tension with financial imperatives of football clubs and mainstream consumer expectations revolving around public safety, the quality of play on the pitch, as well as a desire for food and amenities in the arena – all of which amount to a highly securitized experiential product packaged as a leisure event (Achondo 2023; Armstrong 1998; Clarke 1973; Critcher 1979; Pearson 2012). In contrast to such investigations into class, the ultras I came to know through participant observation and long-form interviews at FC Union Berlin were university students, nurses, kindergarten teachers, firemen, public servants, and even lawyers, while others were unemployed. In this way, ultra fandom across Europe like other populist movements links together heterogeneous populations, defying singular identity categories across a unified logic of dissent positioned against what the hardcore derogatorily call Kommerzsport. I stood with the ultras on the terraces every week, sang with them, and traveled via train and bus all across Germany to faraway stadia over the course of two years – an amount of time necessary to win the fragile trust of those who (not wrongly) saw me as another institutional figure with something to gain from them. Needing to build my own social capital within the scene, I put into practice the radical forms of sacrifice and dedication crucial to ultra fandom that would exhibit a passion for FC Union past pure academic interest or professional advancement. This wariness and distrust for

[6]While football fan scenes in Germany are not strictly defined as working class milieus, I observed across multiple field sites that the stadium space was primarily inhabited by men even though my participation with left-wing ultra groups showed that such hardcore fans specifically desired more diversity.

authority figures reflects a much broader contemporary political disillusion – that in the case of the ultra movement adopts an overarching critique of institutions including the DFB, who fans see as corrupt and illegitimate in their claim to authority. As Germany's national governing body for football, the DFB has become a vector for immense anger and criticism amongst ultra groups across Germany, representing the confluence of ideological and commercial interests that have resulted in the contemporary professional sporting event.

The political potential of style and affect

Contributing to the conceptual goals of this special issue, my research on ultras allows for an investigation of the conflicts that ensue when "existing social formations become unsettled because individuals or groups start contesting what is considered commendable emotional behavior" (Cummins and Pahl 2024 : tbd). Taken one step further, I investigate how ultras reshape social relations in public space through the cultivation of emotive extremes, exploring their activities in transit and their congregation in public spaces as an estranged mode of public engagement and stranger sociability that hinges on the crowd's ability to "invade" particular locations. Put differently, I explore the political potential of heightened aesthetic experience in which "sensation interrupts common sense" (Panagia 2009 : 2) – where style and affect intermingle in ways that illuminate lines of social distinction in public space (Hennion 2005; Highmore 2016; Jack and Conte 2022). It is here that hegemonic notions of taste and distaste (Wilk 1997), expectations around stranger sociability in public space (Warner 2002), as well as liberal understandings of rational political discourse and deliberation are called into question vis-à-vis the kinetics of the crowd (Chowdhury 2019; Mitchell 2023).

Through such avenues of collective action, ultras forcibly change how strangers relate to one another, heightening the emotional sensitivity and reactivity of their milieus. The sonics of crowd expressivity in this context are crucial. I conceive of the affective capacities of vocal performance "as events emerging and exuding from persons and objects" (Eisenlohr 2018 : 83) in which the spatial reach of fan chants and their vocal stylistics both index the combination of *passion* for participants and often *threat* to outsiders in ways that produce distinctively heightened atmosphere in public space. In this process, ultras subvert the "feeling rules" (Hochschild 1979) attached to social norms, replacing them with tense, awkward, and unexpected situations that momentarily scramble quotidian life – a dynamic that ultras describe colloquially as being "*asozial*" (antisocial). *Asozialität*, on one level, can be regarded as a matrix of social practices deemed inappropriate, immoral, or simply in bad taste. In this vein, Richard Wilk (1997 : 183) argues that social distinction is often defined by distaste rather than taste – "by the people you cannot associate with, those you cannot touch, speak to, or eat with." Feeling rules for ultras, then, revolve around the cultivation of affective intensity – which is stoked further by the shock and discomfort these collective acts create amongst strangers. Antisocial behavior, then, is not only a social alternative to more predictable terms of stranger sociability but also a means of *engaging strangers* in unorthodox ways – often without directly speaking to them at all.

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Embracing and enhancing this distinction, it is ultras' antisocial approach to movement and expressivity that elevates mood and demands preemptive measures from state security on the grounds of public safety.[7] In contrast, in press releases the DFB condemns hardcore fans' transgressions on moral grounds, pointing to ultras' violation of middle-class liberal values such as sportsmanship, nonviolence, and respect – ideals that have developed in tandem with the governance, mediatization, and heightened incorporation of commercial strategies in professional football (Achondo 2023; Armstrong and Young 1997; Nuhrat 2018). Focusing first on my experiences in the field at FC Union Berlin, followed by an analysis of SC Dynamo Dresden's protest in Karlsruhe, I explore how fan scenes enculturate participants in both overlapping and contrasting ways that enable them to move collectively through urban space and transgress quotidian stranger sociability. Put another way, I ask how we arrived at our opening scene – with a mass of 2 thousand individuals from 500 kilometers away dressed in matching army fatigues, marching together down the streets of Karlsruhe throwing flares and firecrackers.

Crowd modalities: Assembly, transit, and protest

This essay is structured to showcase the social conditions that enable crowds to move together and cohere with purpose, exploring the shifts in sensory experience and social engagement that inform ultra as a form of political world-making with a populist impulse. In so doing, I highlight three modalities of fan sociality that hinge on increasing degrees of collective coordination, expressive intentionality, and confrontational engagement with outsiders: (1) the assembly of the fan scene in and around the stadium, (2) the crowd in transit, and (3) the crowd in protest. Through the fan scene's ability to coordinate movement and heighten bodily capacity, varied expressions of *Asozialität* become a means of harnessing fans' own estrangement in a way that reclaims public space as it conjures a heightened emotive environment in the process. As I lay out in the next section, this subversive logic of public estrangement and its alternative affective possibilities also rely on hegemonies of collectivized behavior that make coordinated crowd action possible – which manifests through distinctive performative styles, ideologies, and atmospheres that differentiate ultra groups from one another. While antisocial behavior allows ultras to momentarily assert their collective power and take control of the spaces afforded by transportation infrastructure, this power also crystalizes during protest as an effective if not problematic means of attracting attention in ways that paradoxically disqualify the legitimacy of their concerns amongst liberal institutions – that is, until the media picks up on the event.

Performative style and the hegemony of affect

By the time Dynamo Dresden's video was uploaded to YouTube by the German tabloid *Bild*, I had been researching and writing about ultras as a part of my doctoral

[7]Sven, a social worker assigned to work with the ultras at FC Saint Pauli, charted for me the shifting levels of police attention towards ultras in the 1990s as hooliganism as a subculture waned. Sven asserted that the state's strategy of conflict management ironically elevated tensions between both groups over the next two decades.

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research over a span of ten years. As my fieldwork began in Ireland and extended to Hamburg and then Berlin, I was in a unique position to see multiple ultra groups' varying stylistic approaches to the performative cultivation of mood in public space based on their own circumstances – what they often talked about in terms of atmosphere. Despite their unified stance against modern football, which broadly positions ultras globally against the capitalist and commercializing logic of professional sport, local groups diverge culturally, ideologically, and politically from one another. Some identify as radically left wing while others incorporate right-wing perspectives, but many others avoid politically coded discourse altogether so as not to alienate any potential participants in the fan scene.

Belonging to a particular fan scene is thus contingent upon how the identity and values of the football club are imagined and expressed via the crowd. This means that differing tastes in performative style and the varied feelings it produces determine the habitability of a fan scene for some and its inhospitality to others. Ultras' philosophies around crowd support diverged in style and content in spite of each fan scene's overarching goal to keep the atmosphere as high as possible. Across these overarching feelings of estrangement that drive the ultra movement as a transnational subculture, my own participant observation across multiple field sites shows how taste for the aesthetics and particular feelings crowd action produces is a social process that "is formed as it is expressed and is expressed as it is formed" (Hennion 2005 : 136), the stylistics of which may attract some bodies and repel others (Garcia 2020 : 11). In short, the process of cultivating a particular performative aesthetic becomes a way of fine-tuning the heightened experience that ultras desire, but not necessarily in ways that will resonate with or include everyone.

Illustrating the connection between atmosphere and expressive style, Dynamo Dresden's march in Karlsruhe grabbed special attention in and outside of the German ultra community: no one had ever conducted a protest quite like *that*. The provocative theme of war and its performative aesthetics were accompanied by an incredible level of coordination of thousands of supporters, which lent the crowd a sonic and visual force. I both admired the *Aktion* through the grainy video footage circulating online and cringed at the aesthetics of modern warfare. These feelings of discomfort were cultivated in part through my research at a second field site in Berlin with antifascist ultras at EHC Eisbären, who would have also seen the *Aktion* as too referential to Germany's authoritarian and militaristic history. As a former East German club linked with the Stasi (the former secret police), the symbolism of Dynamo evokes discomfort in the public imaginary around right-wing extremism – considered to be more prevalent in the east – which is enflamed further by the club's historical ties to authoritarianism (Jack 2022; Shoshan 2016). In stark contrast, the ultras I knew implemented a visual style and sung repertoire that drew from the Berlin antifa scene, punk subculture, and black bloc protest aesthetics, making performative style and emotional resonance highly specific to every fan scene. Most antifascist ultras could not stomach a more politically conservative, hyper-masculine, and overtly militant fan scene like Dynamo Dresden's, and an antifascist style of atmosphere would likely never resonate with most ultras from Dynamo Dresden. What matters for ultras, then, is not only the political philosophy and subsequent meanings produced through style but also a performative approach that

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animates the desired feelings participants can experience together, based on their sociopolitical backgrounds (Highmore 2016 : 557).

All this is to say that collective style and affectivity do not coalesce entirely through the egalitarianism of mass participation but are also produced through hegemonic social dynamics reproduced through participation itself. In this way, coordinated affectivity is informed by hierarchies within the fan scene, culminating in what I and my colleague Eugenia Siegel Conte (2022 : 127) have previously described as "the structures of feeling that guide, delimit, and compel action in ways that reproduce socially conceived categories and make them visible." This dynamic is well illustrated by Football Army Dynamo Dresden's cultivation of an almost exclusively white and male environment, as seen in Figure 1. Expanding further on the crowd's habitability for some and its inhospitability for others, Eduardo Herrera (2018) points out the ways that chant leaders verbally enforce participation if an individual in the crowd is seen to *not* be singing or might not know the words to a song, sometimes to the point of humiliation if necessary. In my experience, chants were both created and initiated by the most experienced fans with the most social capital. This alludes to the discrepant power individuals accrue based on the number of years they have attended matches as well as their history of attending both home and away games consistently, allowing some participants more influence to impart a particular vision of crowd affectivity than others.

Because atmosphere operates for ultras as a felt metaphor of the football club, it also serves as a metric for them to evaluate the cohesion and stability of fan scenes in general (Jack 2021). The fans at Red Bull Leipzig, for instance, are a perennial target of derision for ultras across Germany because of the team's low levels of crowd support and coordination, which ultras interpret as the waning affective results of commercialization at its worst. When I traveled with the FC Union fans for a game against Leipzig, the very absence of atmosphere in the team's massive stadium was seen as evidence of a lack of fan culture at the brand-new club – a lack the ultras made clear by boycotting the first fifteen minutes of the game to showcase the silence in the arena without "real fans." Perceiving the founding of Red Bull Leipzig as a marketing venture for the brand, the ultras staged another protest during their march to the Red Bull Arena, holding a large black banner that read "Football in Leipzig is Dead." Fans stood behind the banner holding makeshift headstones, each cross labeled with one of their core values – tradition, emotion, fan culture, and standing terraces – to signify the threat Red Bull posed to the social cohesion and lifestyle of fan scenes across Germany. For ultras, the salience of feeling together is strongly linked with the notion of multigenerational fandom that makes FC Union what fans call a *Traditionsverein* (a traditional club). Intertwining club and local community as inseparable and one-and-the-same, for ultras atmosphere becomes a living, breathing totem of the community itself, which is represented and moreover *felt* by "sounding-in-synchrony and moving-in-synchrony" (Herrera 2018 : 482).

As a metaphor for club and local community on the one hand, atmosphere is also experiential and malleable – conceived as "a shared sense of affective intensity" within a particular milieu (McGraw 2016 : 131) that is modulated by ultras' coordination of the crowd and their engagement with the surrounding environment. Contingent upon a participatory style of collective expressivity and movement, vocal and sonic practices can be mobilized to produce a heightened emotionality, even as these feelings are inflected and at times even subverted in unexpected ways by ultras'

surroundings. From this vantage point experience is relational, tuned by its actors in a way "that fundamentally exceeds an individual body or conscious subject" (Riedel 2020 : 4). In the crowd, the vibrational and material dimensions of chants and drumbeats that move through bone and resonate in the lungs are crucial to the perception of *feeling the same feeling, together* (Garcia 2015). This principle of relationality, collective feeling, coordinated action, and its de-individuating effects (Herrera 2018) have refractory results in public spaces, producing a heightened experience that can feel invasive and at times even violent for unenculturated onlookers.

Running parallel to South American fans' aspirations toward achieving *aguante* (the performance of toughness and endurance) (Achondo 2021, 2022; Herrera 2018), the notion of "passion" as an affective disposition amongst fans in Europe links culturally and politically diverse ultra groups across the differentiating dimensions of their performative styles. Seen by the hardcore fans as something that "we have" and "you don't," passion, then, can be conceived as an emotional rubric used to feel and express feelings that build and grow the overall mood in and around the arena. Sound – in the form of crowd vocality and percussive drumming – is crucial for the production of an atmosphere that indexes the affective intensity of passion. However, passion is not an inherent quality that fans do or do not have. Attendance and participation in crowd action cultivate an ability to conjure and project a felt intensity with the intent of charging the bodily capacities of those in attendance. While sustained pulse of percussive instrumentation practice serves to control the aural space (Achondo 2021 : 315), collective vocal stylistics index passion (and to others unpredictability and aggression) through "the collective production of round, deep, loud, intense, prolonged, amplified, and texturally and timbristically dense vocal sounds" (Achondo 2021 : 316). Through the affective charge of collectively voiced recitation that circumvents notions of rational-critical discourse in the Habermasian sense (Eisenlohr 2018), atmospheres charged by immense logistical and performative coordination elicit anxieties around the potentiality of the crowd – what it could do if left unchecked (Jack 2024). In conjunction with state tactics of conflict management, the DFB issues multiyear stadium bans to those caught lighting pyrotechnics, along with people engaging in other illegal activities such as graffiti. Atmosphere, then, is heightened based on two interrelated dynamics. Firstly, hegemonies of crowd affectivity – in short, the disproportionate influence of the most experienced ultras – enable both affective and stylistic coordination on a massive scale by winning the ideological (and subsequently participatory) consent of less socially influential participants. Of equal importance, ultras' performative actions are interpreted as transgressive, dangerous, and at times illegal by outsiders and the sport's governing bodies. As I elucidate below, this perception results in security measures by the state that escalate the atmosphere, insulating and isolating ultras from mainstream fans and the general public even further.

No snitching! Assembly in and around the stadium

The tight-knit and insular qualities of fan scenes are also crucial organizational features for ultras acting in awareness and public defiance of the state and the DFB, allowing them to charge atmosphere based on the antagonistic dynamic with police

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and security who see them as adversaries of the state. This hostile relationship was immediately displayed to me upon my arrival in the fall of 2015, where it became visible how much the government invested time and resources into managing and mitigating the volatile stadium environment at football games. Always armed with recording devices, the police surveilled fan scenes across Germany, compiling profiles of ultras in a national database called the Datei Gewalttäter Sport (Violent Criminal Offender Database), in which individuals did not need to have actually been convicted of a crime to be put on the list. This enhanced an aura of tension and paranoia in the fan scene and many of the ultras treated me, essentially a stranger, with suspicion. I, in turn, was paranoid about what they thought of me, since I was permitted to travel with them but was at first largely ignored.

In addition to the fans' friction with the state, FC Union has acquired a reputation amongst football fans across Europe as a club with a vibrant fan culture and a stellar atmosphere on matchdays, which was a further dynamic contributing to the ultras' wariness of outsiders. Singing is a prerequisite for standing on the terrace behind the goal, called the Waldseite, with the hardcore fans in the Alte Försterei stadium, but this does not necessarily mean that newcomers are entirely welcome. This is partly because of intensive police surveillance and the presence of undercover and plain-clothes police on the terraces, but it is also a response to a kind of gentrification embodied by attendees attracted by the team's ascension to the German Bundesliga in recent years. A team's success on the field can have the counterintuitive effect of drawing spectators who come for and come to expect good results. The purpose of ultra fandom, in contrast, is to produce atmosphere regardless of the outcome – it means cultivating an emotional resilience to losing that the fans called "the ultra mentality." Passion in the stadium is meant to transcend results.

This barrier to entry for newcomers with the "wrong" mentality created a social space in which the Waldseite was more habitable for some than others. As attending Union games became increasingly fashionable, "hipsters" who wanted to experience an authentic fan culture were also resented for their touristic consumption of the sporting event, which misaligned with the ultras' ethos of long-term participation. Occupying the stadium space as a researcher was often uncomfortable for me as well. Many people would not talk to me when I first arrived, and there were even events that I was not privy to. I had to carefully leverage the one connection I had to the fan scene – a trusted interlocutor of my academic advisor – who wound up being critical in getting anyone to talk to me. I was given the phone number of a social worker, Stefan, who had been going to FC Union for decades and was well integrated into the Union community. After asking around, he found an older ultra in his mid-thirties named Manu who was willing to chat with me. We talked for the first time outside a bar called the Abseitsfalle (The Offside Trap), where Unioners hung out before and after the match. For those who had received yearlong stadium bans from the DFB for lighting flares or writing graffiti, it was also the primary location to watch the game.

The ultras who were not banned from the stadium occupied the Waldseite behind the goal, where the largest ultra group, Wuhlesyndikat, had erected a small information kiosk so that fans could sign up for an umbrella group called Szene Köpenick. Membership offered access to the private online message board where it

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was possible to book a seat on the buses the ultras chartered for away games. As leaders with the most cultural capital at FC Union, the ultras brokered in logistics and planning to enable mass travel for the entire scene. Though Wuhlesyndikat had declined to talk to me when Stefan asked, the two ultras at the kiosk – Max and Stephen – seemed to have a change of heart after meeting me in person, agreeing that it would be fine if I traveled with them to the next game in Kaiserslautern. I had naively thought based on my prior field research in Ireland that participation would be open and easily accessible to those who were willing to dedicate the time to the ultras' lifestyle, but I found instead that access to the group would have to be earned slowly as the ultras discerned my intentions through my actions. The issue of trust was even more relevant because I was a researcher. For some, I was just another institutional authority with external interests and a particular desire for information. Besides that, how might I portray them in my writing? Even after being allowed to accompany them to away games each week, I was still treated with careful distance. Insidership and trust are earned over years, not weeks or months. In short, a fundamental aspect of a fan scene's assembly and cohesion is conditionally based on upon solidarity as well as a protective insularity toward unenculturated outsiders and institutional figures.

Coordinated aspects of performative and visual style also served a defensive purpose against the state. Choice of clothing contributes to the cultivation of an overarching aesthetic and collective functionality that make ultra groups recognizable to each other while simultaneously helping them to blend into the crowd, making them difficult for security or police to identify as individuals. These defensive traits operate in tandem with fans' abilities to collectively organize themselves to safely perform the illegal components of the ultra style of support. As an essential stylistic dimension, ultras in Germany wear balaclavas as they light marine flares to avoid identification. An affective counterpoint to "mainstream" fandom, ultras' use of pyrotechnics is the most overt form of dissent, simultaneously serving as a symbol of passion and a direct antithesis to the consumptive aspects of the modern sporting event. Emitting a dramatic neon orange flame that colors the entire terrace, pyrotechnics are exhilarating because they constitute a public flaunting of the law in front of the police, who are surveilling the ultras but can do little to stop them or hold them accountable. Flares, however, are not understood by the state, the DFB, or the media as a protest against commerce and consumer culture, often enhancing broad misunderstandings regarding ultras' critiques of professional sport.

Transit as estranged sociality

Slowly enculturated into the values and stylistics of hardcore fandom through their long-term involvement, the fans who wind up attending matches on a weekly basis and use their time, energy, and financial resources to travel to away games make up the fan scene of their respective football clubs. Defying working-class stereotypes, being an ultra is expensive and time consuming. The hardcore fans I knew had occupations that allowed them to set their own schedules to travel to see Union Berlin play all over Germany, and to accompany the team for their spring training in

Spain. Of particular importance, away games give these fans the opportunity to invade faraway cities in a manner that coincides with the pleasure-soaked masochism of sleepless 24-hour road trips. Comprising the largest window of time to develop relationships with other fans, away trips also build participants' social capital by proving their dedication to the club. For many matches, the ultras at FC Union chartered buses that bumped along to the exact same techno playlist every week, in which songs would recycle and repeat over the course of the trip. Beers cracked open as the morning sun rose above the horizon, and the metronomic bass and repetitive choruses of Die Atzen (roughly translating to "The Fellas") blared over the speakers of the bus: "*Not up for work, nothing matters! Only down to party, party every day!*" Berliner Luft – a sweet, mint-flavored schnapps – was passed to everyone on the bus until the bottle was empty, while the ultras sold Berliner Pilsner from a stack of crates they lugged onto the back of the bus. This high-energy atmosphere took on the tempo of a rave, persisting through the day and night until we arrived back in Köpenick at 4 a.m. the next morning.

Unlike home games that take place in the fans' local milieu, away games offer opportunities to transgress foreign spaces, enabling ultras to build atmosphere in relation to their new contextual circumstances. Cultivating a friction with their surrounding environments, fan scenes take on crowd-like qualities when they begin to move together. Pulling into a parking lot alongside the autobahn, the FC Union fan scene poured out of two chartered buses with open beers and lit cigarettes. While some peed along the fence marking the perimeter of the rest stop, others rushed into the bathrooms. In perpetual competition with other ultra groups, the FC Union ultras used homemade stickers to cover over those from other teams. Meanwhile, several other individuals whipped out markers, tagging the tiles as quickly and as many times as they could. Rest stops in Germany are peppered with ultras' graffiti. Once I developed an eye for it I started to see it everywhere – on buses, bridges, trains, in bathrooms, and on street signs.

As cars whizzed by on the autobahn, I chatted with the group's drummer about the upcoming match, but I was distracted by another ultra climbing up a pole 10 meters off the ground to stencil the group's logo on a road sign. He slid down coolly as a hundred other ultras smoked and chatted in the hazy morning light. A casual disregard for order characterizes the group's travel to away games. We got a lot of long looks and even some of disgust as the smell of chemicals from spray paint hung in the air. There is a power to acting in numbers – such behaviors prickle outsiders in part because there is nothing they can do or say when they are outnumbered. Transit for ultras is an implicit experiment in eliciting reactions from others and incorporating them into the situation they have created.

Auswärts ist mein asozial (away games are my time to be antisocial) is a cliché amongst hardcore fans that gets at the heart of their approach to travel as well as at the broader style of ultra fandom itself – it is a type of collective expression that brings out the discomfort of those who are present but not privy to the group. With this full awareness, ultras incorporate a whole range of distasteful activities and export them into public space. Moreover, these practices are antisocial for the reason that they are conducted *in public and in relation to others*. By rubbing up against prevailing etiquette and behavioral expectations, a key dimension of antisocial behavior is the unpredictable range of outsider emotions that it cultivates

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as spectators are forced to manage their surprise, disapproval, discomfort, or amusement. This style of collectivized behavior temporarily reorients an environment that others are forced to inhabit. Singing, drinking, smoking indoors, playing “bad music” too loud – all exhibit a taste for curating distaste amongst bystanders.

In this way, trains offer another set of transgressive opportunities because they bring fan scenes into contact with unsuspecting passengers headed toward unrelated destinations. Avoiding the high-speed InterCity Express trains, ultras ride regional train lines in part because they are cheap but also because they expand the time to be spent partying. Paying 40 euro for a weekend ticket, fan scenes often make two or three transfers on obscure regional lines for trips that can last four hours or more, often drawing riot police to the connecting train stations in the process. Police surveillance in transit ironically ripens the conditions for conflict to occur between fans and riot police, necessitating secrecy, solidarity, and collective coordination if ultras are to reduce the number of arrests, court dates, fines, and stadium bans received by members of the group. These state attempts at weakening their cohesion cause ultras to become more organized, secretive, and insular in their social organization. Police, on the other hand, legitimize their own presence through reference to prior histories of fan misbehavior.

After an exhibition match against FC Hansa in Rostock in 2017, I sat with the Union fan scene on the train ride home; they had taken over a double-decker train car. As music played from a portable speaker and a haze of cigarette smoke hung in the air, fans began ripping paneling from the walls and throwing it on the ground along with other trash and debris that they had accumulated throughout the day. Rather than creating a buoyant or frenetic atmosphere, demeanors were remarkably relaxed. People drank, smoked, and talked while others dismantled the train car as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening at all. When entering a train, it is wise to cover the surveillance cameras that protrude from the ceiling with stickers to obscure any illicit activity in case the tapes get reviewed by the authorities later on. Accumulating at Berlin-Gesundbrunnen, a mass of riot police filmed everyone as we stepped onto the platform. However, there was little they could actually do to apprehend anyone because it was impossible to know who amidst the mass of bodies had done what. Instead, the police tweeted “Das geht gar nicht!” (This is unacceptable!) alongside a photo of the demolished train car. The fan scene’s *asozial* behavior presents itself as a moment in which their collective power allows them to do as they please while revealing their ambivalence to the parameters of order and the police’s ability to enforce it.

Additionally, trains also present themselves as moving canvases for ultras to practice and implement their graffiti. Much like sticker culture, graffiti has developed into a key dimension of ultras’ activities, which becomes competitive between groups across Germany who vie to create the best artwork in the most creative and subversive ways. Upon my arrival at FC Union in 2015, a DVD was being passed around on the terraces that had been produced by fans at FC Hansa Rostock, who had filmed themselves breaking and entering all sorts of tunnels and warehouses to tag subway cars and Deutsche Bahn trains (2017). Sneaking down into the subways of Hamburg wearing red, white, and blue balaclavas, they deftly and skillfully painted an entire train from front to back before posing for the

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cameras with lit pyrotechnics. The two hours of footage that was recorded, produced, and released flaunts the ultras' public transgressions, just as the graffiti itself operates as another means of provocation while the train moves through the city. In this way, movement becomes a key dimension of ultras' expressive tactics that confront outsiders and authorities with the spectacle they have created.

Street protest: The Dynamo Dresden Fan March

Due to their capacity for mass organization and coordination, ultras are also able to harness their collective capacities for protest, mobilizing the crowd to evocatively articulate critiques most often directed at the condition of professional football. In the context of protest, ultras pointedly operationalize distasteful behavior because it serves as an atmospheric catalyst, grabbing the attention of outsiders. In contrast to many political movements that work to galvanize broad participation and political legitimacy through an overt demeanor of nonviolence appealing to liberal values, marginal ideological positions require inflammatory approaches to garner media attention. On the streets of Karlsruhe, the militaristic drum patterns, jarring bangs emitted by fireworks, and imposing mass of camouflaged bodies of Ultra Dresden invaded urban space and ultimately stormed the Wildparkstadion in a way that forcibly incorporated police and unwitting pedestrians into the spectacle, crystallizing the terms of the group's alienation from the governing body's claims to democratic representation of their interests. In its militancy and aggression, an alarming protest is operative and functional because of the attention it garners and the emotional response it produces. Like it or not, it makes you look.

In a press release after the march, the ultras clarified the intent and rationale of the *Aktion*. Displaying a clear ideology and intentionality, press releases serve to undercut stereotypes of ultras as thick-headed, violence-seeking hooligans. The combined method of protest and press release contextualizes the meaning of the *Aktion* to a broader public. "There is no more communication in our conflict [with the DFB] anymore," wrote Ultras Dynamo (2017). "Videos, letters, or texts on a homepage to the DFB are simply a waste of time. … It's obvious the biggest provocation was necessary so the people finally understand that the current situation is untenable!" The group's description of the *Aktion* as a provocation is apt because it is an act that intends to elicit response through its unsavory approach to public assembly. The spectacle of *Krieg dem DFB* was accompanied by a hope that the ultras' fringe criticisms would engage a wider public about the league's prioritization of global capital over local fandom.

> The word "war" goes too far for some people. It is our opinion that the hyperbole is necessary so that our situation will be taken seriously for what it is. A fight! … For that reason spectacular pictures [of the *Aktion*] were delivered to gain the attention of a wider public and the media. Obviously it worked. … We need only watch how a guy like Mr. Grindel [the DFB president] shook every hand in the VIP Area of the Rudolf-Harbig Stadium [home of Dynamo Dresden] three weeks ago. Why couldn't he use this time to approach the fans? What are the people's problems? What do the people actually want and why do

> they do so much for their football club? This two-class society is a common theme in this country. The gap between rich and poor is getting wider, just like the gap between the football association, the football clubs, and the fans. The concerns of the fans and their hardships aren't taken seriously and for that reason radical steps must be taken in order to be heard. (ibid)

For Ultras Dynamo, the estranged relation between fans and the DFB – and its broader reflection of a stratified German society – necessitated that quotidian ambience be hijacked and repurposed to serve their public address. It is particularly significant that the group cultivated a threatening and emotionally hostile environment on the streets in Karlsruhe *without* any physical violence occurring between fans or police. While the Bundespolizei reported to the media that 21 officers were injured in the wake of the ultras' march to the stadium, it was later clarified after further inquiries that no injuries were sustained through direct physical altercation, but rather through reported "acoustic trauma" from the firecrackers that the ultras had lit (Faszination Fankurve 2017c).

The DFB's response, however, fixated on the militant aesthetics of the *Aktion*, which threatened football's core values, President Grindel (2017) argued. "Football has the power to integrate," he wrote.

> This gives rise to a special responsibility. Football stands for togetherness, solidarity, team spirit, and fair play.
>
> In the past few weeks and months, I have been very concerned that there have been militant marches, "war declarations," and inhumane actions against teams and their fans in connection with football games. That's not what football in Germany should stand for. This has to end. (Grindel 2017)

In this way, the protest was perceived as antithetical to the values of the DFB not because of the ideology behind the critique but because of the polarizing and divisive *style in which it was performed*. From this vantage point, the aesthetic and material dimensions of performance (irrespective of physical touch) destabilize the moral foundations of football, making the mood *feel* violent. This experiential fracture between ultras and outsiders is key to the production of the heightened and volatile atmosphere of the *Aktion*. Yet the paradox of this encounter is that if the ultras had not created such a spectacle President Grindel would not have engaged with them to begin with. Being noticed by the DFB, however, is not necessarily the same as being understood.

While conflict between ultras, the state, and the DFB is a regular occurrence at football matches, this time Dynamo Dresden's march prompted journalistic reporting of fans' grievances, prompting a press release from the DFB president, who pledged to sit down to a meeting with them. The key, he emphasized, was rational and collected dialogue. "It is time to pause. It is time to rethink," Grindel (2017) wrote. At a meeting scheduled to address the ultras' concerns, President Grindel argued that the majority of football fans in Germany stood behind him, which elicited laughter from the ultras in the room (Spiller 2017). In the two parties'

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conflicting claims to majority representation, there is a discord over what fandom is and who counts as a fan. Ultras conceive of fans as those who attend football in person on a regular basis, while from the DFB's perspective fandom leaves room to include those who watch on TV through the revenue streams that broadcasting has enabled.

While the DFB's categorical alignment with and embodiment of liberal universals such as equality, diversity, and nonviolence serves an essential role in legitimizing the institution's right to both govern and punish in lieu of any representative voting process, ultras threaten these principles through public rupture as a means of forcibly re-inserting themselves into policies and decision making. As such, there is a function to the ultras' protest that draws attention to what casual fans and the general public may not necessarily see on television. In their assertions that "football without fans is nothing," ultras claim the essence of professional football is not players, coaches, or administrators but fans – a radical position that takes on a populist point of view. Taken one step further, their chants of "*DFB Fußballmafia!*" during the march in Karlsruhe underscored a view that the German Football Association is an organization structuring football whose authority is illegitimate and arbitrarily assigned. Protest in this context cultivates the affective and emotional intensities of the crowd to highlight an injustice that exceeds past debates over TV times or stadium bans and extends toward the larger issue of who has the right to govern at all. In this way, crowd action serves as a function of public address that misaligns with the liberal democratic principles that the DFB supposes to espouse. However, the crowd is the most immediate means of having a voice – or at least getting noticed – where co-opting the emotional dynamics of a space forces an institutional engagement with its alienated subjects.

Conclusions

Contributing to this special issue's exploration of the ways that emotions can unsettle and reshape social relations, ultras' *asozial* behavior stems in part from the fans' general estrangement from the commercialization and mediatization of professional football, changing styles of fan praxis geared toward television, and the ways that these developments are governed in the stadium by the state and the DFB. Taking as my starting point that populism is not wedded to any one end of the political spectrum (Laclau 2005; Mazzarella 2019; Mouffe 2022; Samet 2019), I posit here that populist cultural formations can engage in issues that extend outside normative political discourse and in so doing instrumentalize a moral authority to forge alternative social pathways by force and without apology. In particular, I have pointed toward the stylistic use of sound, affect, and space – or *atmosphere*, as ultras call it – as the crucial terrain from which such power and collective agency is forged in football fandom. If politics are as much about feelings and sensation as ideology, deliberation, or discourse (Kazin 1998; Panagia 2009; Patch 2019), then ultras allow us to consider how discontent extends and permutates outside the realm of formalized politics into the affective realm of stadia, public infrastructure, and the streets through the kinetics of the crowd. Populist impetus incorporates sensation and material space as its political terrain, where distasteful practice is weaponized

as a form of social distinction (Wilk 1997) and as a means of claiming and re-articulating public space. Because populism as a term is slippery and hard to define in any singular fashion (Mazzarella 2019), it has been my goal to flip this definitional vagueness into an advantage by seeking out alternative permutations in counterintuitive cultural spaces such as football fandom. Rather than being reliant on charismatic leadership like many populist movements (Kazin 1998), however, the transnational nature of ultra fandom shows that populist dissent can also be decentralized, emerging in unexpected places outside of institutionalized politics while evading conventional issues deemed "political" altogether. Representative of a trending disillusionment toward liberal institutions at large (Hofman 2020; Muir 2019), ultras are but one case study in a contemporary moment where social and political discontent have no clear avenue toward satisfying governmental transformation.

Not necessarily in all circumstances a dark reflection of the contemporary erosion of liberaly democracy (Calhoun et al. 2022), populism also manifests in certain situations as a "deeply embodied publicity" in its attempt to shape democratic politics (Cody 2015 : 52) – in particular by making a play at enhanced visibility and audibility in public space. In the context of hardcore football fandom in Germany, stylized expressions of passion – coordinated en masse – stand in as an affective resource and an estranged form of public engagement that provides its own alternative social possibilities, internal inequalities, and moral ambiguities for participants. I have structured this essay to explore the modalities through which crowds cohere and move together. Manifesting through varied degrees of affective coordination and vocal performance ranging from (1) assembly around the stadium, (2) to movement in transit and crystalizing, and (3) as protest on the streets, I have argued that the acoustic-vibrational possibilities of the crowd paired with the aesthetics of public performance operate as a logic of affectation that incorporates strangers as it transforms the terms of engagement in public space. Fan chants in conjunction with percussive instrumentation and the blasts of pyrotechnics – all pushed to immense decibel levels – operationalize sound as a means of upending the logics of public space toward the heightened production of atmosphere. At the same time, the feeling rules *within* a fan scene, the group's capacity for collective coordination, and their expressive stylistics are reliant on hegemonies reproduced and adjudicated through crowd participation. In short, atmospheric production is contingent on hierarchy and disproportionate influence within the crowd itself as well as an exclusivity that reproduces a space predominantly for young white men, creating a hegemony of affect and expressive style that both enables belonging for some and impedes it for others. The momentary rush of power that these "distasteful" acts garner is in part the point for hardcore fans who see themselves generally marginalized and unrepresented by professional football at large, which does not align with their values or priorities.

In crucial moments of perceived ideological injustice, however, ultras' mobilization of *asozial* qualities into crowd protest marks a shift toward explicit criticism that is intended to be legible to outsiders. The *Krieg dem DFB* campaign represents a moment in which Ultras Dynamo's criticism transformed into a wave of protests by ultras across Germany. At FC Union, the ultras presented a banner criticizing the lack of earnest negotiation between fans and the national governing

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body – "Unopen to Dialogue with Fan Scenes While Wasting Time on Absurd Punishments: War Against the DFB!" (Faszination Fankurve 2017d). The media coverage generated by the protest – in conjunction with the militant visual and acoustical aesthetics of its performance – momentarily circulated the *Aktion* to a mainstream audience via the news media, prompting the DFB to acknowledge the ultras' concerns and engage in tempered dialogue as a means of performing its openness to discourse and outside criticism. Akin to Sara Ahmed's (2017) observations about institutional attempts at systemic reform, the DFB's appearance of engaging in discourse is often the end point of "doing something" rather than the beginning of initiating structural transformation. In lieu of actionable shifts in policy, the public performance of acknowledgement and recognition, then, becomes a *feature* of governance itself. My own fieldwork at FC Union Berlin exemplified the simmering discontent amongst fans, heightened by the alienating and socially insulating ramifications of surveillance and commercialization in football stadia – a dynamic that showcases an ideological gulf between ultras and sport's governing bodies across Germany, as well as its sweeping cultural ramifications.

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