



# Modern Micropolitics of Antipopulism: Rethinking Discourse and Empathy

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Received: 30 April 2024 / Revised: 20 November 2024 / Accepted: 16 December 2024 / Published online: 23 January 2025  
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**Abstract** In recent years, the debate on right-wing populism has led to numerous calls for the defense of liberal democracy, especially in Germany. The question of the extent to which liberal democracy depends on certain values, attitudes, and behavior has been raised from various sides. This article analyzes this public debate by focusing on publications that formulate recommendations for dealing with right-wing populists. These texts not only reflect on the possibilities and limits of rational debate between citizens but also promote an ideal of the good liberal democrat. The interventions can thus be understood as contemporary codes of conduct that contain elements of social and democratic theories and translate them into practical considerations. Ultimately, they represent a kind of self-undermining post-Habermasian discourse ethics.

**Keywords** Populism · Discourse · Codes of conduct · Democracy · Civility · Jürgen Habermas

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## Moderne Mikropolitik eines Antipopulismus: Neuverhandlungen von Diskurs und Empathie

**Zusammenfassung** In den letzten Jahren hat insbesondere in Deutschland die Debatte über den Rechtspopulismus zu zahlreichen Forderungen nach einer Verteidigung der liberalen Demokratie geführt. Die Frage, inwieweit liberale Demokratie auf bestimmte Werte, Einstellungen und Umgangsformen angewiesen ist, wurde von verschiedenen Akteuren diskutiert. Der vorliegende Beitrag analysiert diese öffentliche Debatte anhand von Publikationen, die Empfehlungen für den Umgang mit Rechtspopulisten formulieren. Diese Texte loten nicht nur die Möglichkeiten und Grenzen einer rationalen Debatte zwischen den Bürgern aus, sondern entwerfen auch ein Ideal des guten liberalen Demokraten. Die Interventionen können somit als zeitgenössische Verhaltenslehren verstanden werden, die Elemente der Sozial- und Demokratietheorien enthalten und diese in praktische Überlegungen übersetzen. Letztlich liefern sie eine Art sich selbst unterminierende post-Habermasianische Diskursethik.

**Schlüsselwörter** Populismus · Diskurs · Verhaltenslehren · Demokratie · Bürgerlichkeit · Jürgen Habermas

### 1 Introduction

In recent years, the debate on right-wing populism has led to numerous calls for a defense of liberal democracy, especially in Germany. Various people have addressed the extent to which liberal democracy depends on certain values, attitudes, and civility and needs more than institutional bulwarks in times of the electoral success of populist parties. In 2020, Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, for example, warned that militant democracy (*wehrhafte Demokratie*) requires militant civil society (Steinmeier 2020). “Society” must raise its voice—individuals must not remain silent in the face of provocations, hatred, and disrespect, according to Steinmeier’s tenor, which numerous actors agree with. Calls such as “Get up!” and “Say something!” and ideas on how to “talk to the right” are legion. These political appeals and invocations conceive forms of resistance against (right-wing) populism—they convey a certain understanding of populism and antipopulism.

While “populism” has become a well-established and overused term, antipopulism denotes efforts to contain and counter the populist challenge to liberal democracy, especially from the far right. In response to the “populist hype” (Glynos and Mondon 2019), antipopulists construct a crucial antagonism between democrats and populists (Stavrakakis 2014; Stavrakakis et al. 2018). They call for the affirmation of liberal democracy, yet they lack an emancipatory agenda to solve the problems of today’s political constellation and seek to shield it from contestation. This is one of the reasons why critics describe contemporary antipopulism as “helpless” and as false moralizing (Jörke and Selk 2015) or see it as an “expression of post-politics” (Marchart 2017).

In what follows, I attempt to engage with this debate and to differentiate the critique. I will take up the quoted motif of “raising one’s voice” and explore how the idea of a vibrant, debating civil society is used and misused for contemporary antipopulism (2). I shed light on an exemplary sample of German publications that formulate recommendations for discussion and conversation techniques and attempt to show how one can speak out against and confront right-wing populists (3). I then interpret these publications as contemporary codes of conduct that contain elements of social and democratic theories and translate them into practical considerations, which present something like a post-Habermasian discourse ethics. Instead of the “unforced force of the better argument” (Habermas 1993, p. 145) and the reason-based consensus that Jürgen Habermas famously proposed in his discourse ethics, these codes of conduct question the possibility of rational discourse and shift their focus to everyday life and the affective dimensions of social interactions (4). They repeatedly emphasize the importance of recognition and empathy and formulate an ideal of empathetic sociality rooted in the lifeworld of the individual. This contrasts with notions of conflictual, agonal politics as well as with a Habermasian notion of a discursively generated intersubjectivity and agreement, which leads me to a conclusion in which I discuss a crucial pitfall of these manuals: They promote *self-undermining* discourse ethics (5).

## 2 Civil Society, the Public Sphere, and the Bourgeois Norms of Discourse

The concept of civil society has long been in vogue (von Beyme 2000); it is based on the “vision of a pluralistic and secularized society of free and independent individuals who regulate their relations with each other peacefully and rationally” (Herbert 2002, p. 13)<sup>1</sup> and who organize themselves under the protection of, but beyond, state structures. In the twentieth century, the concept of civil society has captured the idea that the stability and legitimacy of modern order are linked to the interactions of individuals rather than to transcendent doctrines (von Beyme 2000). Civil society can be understood as an “intermediate space” (Holtkamp et al. 2006, p. 52); as a space of a certain social class, the *bourgeoisie* (Kocka 2001; 2006); and as certain forms of social behavior, *civility* (Holtkamp et al. 2006, p. 53). It is the place where the communication structures of the public sphere are anchored in the lifeworld (Habermas 1993). Accordingly, individuals experience their social embeddedness not only as an organizational matter but also as a communicative one. Civil society manifests itself not only in clubs, associations, volunteer work, and neighborhoods—in general, in social relations and diverse encounters—but also in discourses. The subjects of civil society communicate, share, and verbalize their interests, concerns, conflicts, and commonalities.

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<sup>1</sup> Translation by author. According to Ulrich Herbert, the concept of civil society gained importance after 1945 and emphasizes that traditions are supplemented “by the public sphere and discourse as a basis of legitimacy” (Herbert 2002, p. 13).

According to Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action, *reason* is built into the way people speak. When they communicate, they make various claims to validity: They assert truth, rightness, and sincerity (Habermas 1984). Thus, a speech act can be judged in terms of three questions: Is what someone says propositionally true? Is it normatively right? Is the expression sincere and truthful? If yes, the communicators reach an agreement (Habermas 1984, p. 306 f.). Discourse then means aiming for a rationally motivated consensus, which is different from strategic action, trickery, or bargaining. It is neither the subjectivity of individuals nor the objectivity of an external world, but what is called "intersubjectivity" that guarantees reason.

But Habermas himself knows, and we all know, that the public sphere and (civil) society are not only realms of reasonable, compromise-oriented, rational discourse. These spheres are characterized by social, political, and epistemic asymmetries; by the marginalization of subaltern groups; by relations of domination and power; by resentful conflicts; and by silent routines, noiseless coexistence, and unreflected arrangements. Against this background, Habermas's *ideal* of "discourse" as the locus of public reason through language has been debated countless times, often neglecting that Habermas was talking about counterfactual, idealized presuppositions (Habermas 2001). Writers and theorists have turned their attention to phenomena that are considered irrational, affective, identity-invoking, and possibly dissent-oriented (for instance, Mouffe 2007; Honig 1993; Wenman 2013; on the political relevance of emotions, see Szanto and Slaby 2020; Hochschild 2016). There have been repeated debates about polarization and about why talks between political opponents fail, escalate, or even must be broken off. We have learned to doubt public practices, rationality, and even the possibility of consensus-oriented communication.<sup>2</sup>

We can better understand these doubts and uncertainties against the background of long-standing ideals of the civic public sphere and discourse. Obviously, the understanding of the public sphere and civil society as spaces of discursivity has historical and social roots. The salons of the Enlightenment, the coffeehouses, the associations of the eighteenth century, etc., gave rise to a sphere characterized by publicity, deliberation, and argumentation. The guiding principles of ideal behavior for the emerging European bourgeoisie were the ability to criticize one's interlocutors as well as political and state authorities and to prove oneself reasonable. Specific skills were expected and valued: To prove one's maturity and responsibility, one had to articulate one's point of view in a certain way, formulate criticism, and develop "persuasive power" (Linke 1996, p. 49; Verheyen 2010, p. 46). Rhetorical skills served the social distinction of the bourgeoisie; the idealization of reason and criticism led to a specific, bourgeois "rhetorical culture" (*Sprachkultur*; Linke 1996). Practices of speaking, discussing, and approaching one another were taught and led to the enduring ideal of a discourse that is free of domination, consensus-oriented, and based on argument (Habermas 1991).

With regard to concrete forms and practices of communication, one can further distinguish between two "communicative genres" (Verheyen 2010, p. 57), as they can be found in the eighteenth century and in relevant etiquette books, conversation

<sup>2</sup> Julian Müller (2015, p. 169) highlights the specifically modern reaction to an "uncertainty about morality" that can be understood as an equivalent problem.

dictionaries, and treatises. Discussions were seen “above all as a variety of ‘debates’ and thus as a political, fact-oriented, masculine, even agonal discourse”; a “relationship-oriented ‘conversation’ that united both sexes [...]” (Verheyen 2010, p. 47), however, was something else.<sup>3</sup> Conversation was considered light and superficial (Verheyen 2010, p. 47) and tended to cover topics such as literature and art (Verheyen 2010, p. 48). Conversation at family or social gatherings served “bourgeois sociability” (Verheyen 2010, p. 48) and limited the topics and modes of communication, as the aim was to demonstrate friendliness, sociability, and social skills. Conversations were to avoid explosive, conflictual topics and open dissent. Etiquette books and conversation encyclopedias therefore outlined topics and rules for this pleasant form of exchange.

In discussions, one would expect people to presuppose the universalist claims to validity that Habermas emphasized, whereas in conversations they remain in brackets or implicit.<sup>4</sup> Probably the claim to sincerity predominates in conversations. While debates and discussions can instruct, provide insight, and address conflictual issues, conversations serve to entertain, build relationships, and, indirectly, create a sense of community (Linke 1996; Verheyen 2010, p. 50). Conversation was seen as polite and bourgeois; discussion, dissent, and argument were seen as aggressive and socially risky. Hence, the interactions and communicative techniques, the “rhetorical culture” of the bourgeoisie, “set rigid limits to open disputes” (Verheyen 2010, p. 54; Linke 1996). A factual, political dispute could therefore not be understood as a conversation, and breaking off a discussion was considered a particularly bourgeois technique (Verheyen 2010, p. 56).<sup>5</sup> The bourgeoisie identified rules for stabilizing social harmony.

Even if we do not take this distinction between discussion and conversation as strictly empirical, it is based on existing social practices and categorizes them by formulating ideals. It thus influences practices by providing (normative, social) orientation. It is possible to separate discussion from conversation conceptually, even if in reality the two forms often coincide or interfere: Conversations turn into discussions, discussions are cancelled, and actors may return to harmless, cheerful conversation.

In this context, the historian Nina Verheyen (2010) has also analyzed how the Allies, especially the United States, wanted to promote the “joy of discussion” as an antidote to the totalitarian, authoritarian, and harmony-centered political culture of post-1945 Germany. As part of their postwar “reeducation” programs, they promoted discussion formats and political debates, as Germans were supposed to learn how to have discussions in their everyday lives. Democratization and the liberalization of society, the practical affirmation of pluralism, and the playful competence of discussion were seen as interlinked.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Translations of German quotations have been done by the author if not indicated otherwise.

<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer who encouraged me to make this distinction clear.

<sup>5</sup> “On this basis, breaking off a political debate through one-sided silence or not allowing it to arise in the first place can be summarized as a primarily bourgeois tactic” (Verheyen 2010, p. 56).

<sup>6</sup> Whether the German culture of debate in the postwar decades was more conducive to democracy and closer to Habermas’s ideal than it is today is a matter for another discussion. Cf. Herbert (2002).

With this in mind, we can now turn to interventions that explicitly seek to revive the ideal of the joy of discussion today. For the following analysis, I have compiled a sample of prominent and symptomatic texts from the German debate, albeit not an all-encompassing corpus, and applied an interpretive textual analysis (Titscher et al. 2000; Wiesner 2022). In the publications analyzed, authors and political actors complain that Germany is suffering from a declining culture of debate and discussion, especially after years of a grand coalition under Angela Merkel and in the face of aggressive right-wing populism. For this reason, they are reconsidering the characteristics of good discussion and individual civic engagement, which would strengthen civil society. We are faced with a genre of *handbooks* that explore communicative practices and see them as an antipopulist antidote.

### 3 Codes of Conduct and Rules of Etiquette: Discourse Manuals as a Symptom of an Unsettled Bourgeois Milieu

Routines, practices, norms, and behaviors tend to become explicit when they become fragile and questionable. The presuppositions, the “latent” dimension of society, i.e., what is experienced as self-evident, natural, or simply given, become perceptible (Parsons 1951). With regard to questions of morality and social behavior, we find a precedent for this among the moralists: Authors such as La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère formulated moral “maxims and reflections” in response to “[t]he multiple experiences of contingency that characterize the early modern period and modernity after the challenge to the ontological certainties of being” (Behrens and Moog-Grünewald 2010, p. VIII). What was needed was a “new orientation towards oneself and the other” (Behrens and Moog-Grünewald 2010, p. VIII).<sup>7</sup> Because human behavior was understood to be “unpredictable,” the moralistic writings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were characterized by “an aesthetic of ambiguity, paradox and irony” (Behrens and Moog-Grünewald 2010, p. IX).

While these authors were responding to an awareness of a fragile, socially variable, and “fungible” morality (Müller 2015, p. 163), today’s reflections on the forms, practices, and ultimately the ethics of good political debate are also responding to a particular uncertainty. Not only morality but also rationality (understood here as antonyms in the popular sense) are experienced as fragile and situational and are therefore being reexamined. The prerequisites for successful communication are no longer understood as “truisms” (Maas 2017, p. 46) but seem to require an explanation—especially to a nonacademic audience. Talking and writing about how to “talk,” “discuss,” and “argue” properly about a culture of debate are booming, as new media have widened the circle of speakers. Opportunities for articulation and participation have increased, enabling new forms of political speech and making it impossible to ignore other voices and other, less bourgeois forms of expression.

<sup>7</sup> However, these authors also emphasized that this orientation remains sensitive to contingency, casuistry, specificity, heterogeneity, and situationality and therefore distinguish it from an anthropological a priori. Interestingly, the moralists can therefore be said to have renounced moralism and moral theory.

In this situation, bourgeois liberal democrats need to reassert their means of social distinction and defend their ground.

Politicians, journalists, authors, and public intellectuals from the progressive or conservative camp (Bolz 2020, 2021), as well as actors from the far-right spectrum and self-help gurus, all seem to agree that “a culture of open thinking and (counter)speech, i.e. a democratic culture of debate, is exposed to numerous threats [...]” (Frick 2017, p. 57). Like many others, the journalist Christian Schüle writes, “Politicians and citizens [have] forgotten how to argue with style” (Schüle 2019, p. 298). Heiko Maas, who ventured into this genre as a federal minister in 2017, states that we must “save our culture of debate” (Maas 2017, p. 46).<sup>8</sup> Authors such as Maas; Schüle; Bernhard Pörksen and Friedemann Schulz von Thun (2020); Franzi von Kempis (2019); Philipp Steffan (2019); Haznain Kazim (2020); David Lanius and Romy Jaster (2019)<sup>9</sup>; and Marie-Louise Frick (2017) therefore want to show how political debates can be “civilized,” “constructive,” and “polite.” In general, many of these authors write the same or at least similar things; the redundancy of these publications is striking and is reminiscent of the booming sectors of life and business coaching (Kühl 2008; Taffertshofer 2009). But it is precisely this redundancy that makes it interesting to analyze the arguments of these authors, who see the problem of populism as one that can and should be countered through communication. First, this distinguishes this line of argument from another that calls for a complete rejection of all discussion (on its ambivalence: Kazim 2020); second, it is linked to a—popularized—renegotiation of discourse ethics, wrestling with the ideal of rational and factual discourse. Third, these texts reveal visions of civic and everyday forms of antipopulism.

Far right-wing populism is understood not only as a political problem but also as a communicative, social, moral, and epistemic challenge. These authors write about an “attitude that each individual can adopt and practice” (Frick 2017, p. 90) and proclaim norms of bourgeois or postbourgeois<sup>10</sup> society. Their ethical keywords are, on the one hand, courage, refutation, defense, and struggle, and, on the other hand, civility, decency, attitude, and politeness. Maas, for example, states that the “basic equipment of citizens in a democratic state” needs to be reconsidered (Maas 2017, p. 46), while Schüle—again, like many others—points out that today, in the midst of a “combat zone,” “the codes of civic self-understanding” are at stake (Schüle 2019, p. 10). He identifies “decency” as the decisive “virtue” (Schüle 2019, pp. 298–299).<sup>11</sup>

Many of these writings formulate civic virtues and repeatedly refer to psychological, sociopsychological universalisms. They try to draw attention to the limits of human reason. Not everyone seems to be receptive to argument, and we find a jux-

<sup>8</sup> Because all of these authors have all published in German and speak to the German public, the previous and following quotations have all been translated, too.

<sup>9</sup> The latter run a *Forum für Streitkultur* and publish numerous articles on the subject, offer training courses, etc. See <https://forum-streitkultur.de>

<sup>10</sup> Postbourgeois seems an appropriate addition, as it is not as unbourgeois as the permanent exhibition of one’s own bourgeoisie.

<sup>11</sup> Schüle (2019, p. 300) also refers to the historical tradition in which he wants to place his concept of “conversation culture” and refers to salons and cafés, which he then links to spaces such as youth centers, meeting places, etc.

taposition of rationality and empathy. Pörksen and Schulz von Thun, for example, declare that “[m]an is a relational being. The quality of his life stands and falls with the quality of successful relationships. This means that we always need both: a willingness to argue and a minimum level of understanding and empathy” (Pörksen and Schulz von Thun 2020, p. 55). While the authors remind their readers of the indispensable willingness to engage in rational discourse, they also openly acknowledge and allow for idiosyncrasies, sensitivities, and irrationalities. We are therefore dealing with almost hypermodern codes of conduct that address and reflect modern insecurities, ambiguities, and tensions. These publications are set against the background of both a “loss of confidence in a universal and timeless morality” (Müller 2015, p. 169) and universal rationality. Apodictic answers or essentialist definitions of what morality and rationality are seem prescriptive and illegitimate. Consequently, the philosopher Frick emphasizes that her reflections on civilized disputes are “not intended to prescribe what should be thought” but rather “how to think about some of the most important questions of our time [...]” (Frick 2017, p. 8). The conditions, methods, and practicalities of communication come into focus.

#### 4 Practicalities of Communication: Tips and Recommendations for Political Disputes

The publications analyzed here often evoke situations from everyday life. It is family celebrations, as well as situations on the bus, in the underground, in the office, or at the sports club that suddenly put individuals to the political test because someone is expressing right-wing populist, discriminatory, inhumane, or extremist views and provocations (e.g., Steffan 2019; Kazim 2020). Authors or speakers then appeal to the individual recipient and teach him or her to oppose and protest (verbally). In doing so, these discourse manuals mark a tension between discussion and conversation—it is precisely their tipping points that are often at issue regarding questions such as the following: What happens if we cannot avoid political quarrels—is a nonpolitical, noncommittal conversation more helpful in maintaining a social relationship or establishing it? How can interlocutors and possible dissenters deescalate and move from harsh arguments back to friendly conversation? What discursive and social techniques are available for this? By addressing these tipping points, these publications are possibly more straightforward than Habermas and his ideal of discourse. After all, one could criticize Habermas for underestimating the extent to which bourgeois conversational culture has always contained an element of conservative, harmonious conversation and has promoted not just well-informed criticism, argumentation, and contradiction.

In times of a supposedly increasing polarization, these authors argue, even private conversations and interactions are never entirely politically unmotivated or neutral. Political socialization and subjectivation take place through the creation and maintenance of sociability—and it seems necessary to create *common ground* in order to resolve, postpone, or suppress (political) conflict.

Ideally then, arguments should be constructive:

“Good argument is always constructive. It aims to find solutions. As a high art of communication, it requires self-control and sovereignty. A good argument basically means listening first, letting the other person have their say and meeting them at eye level. It means recognizing and acknowledging differences, examining arguments and appreciating the ‘other’ point of view. A good argument means being interested, showing interest, and thereby establishing a relationship. If you don’t argue and just shout, you don’t relate” (Schüle 2019, p. 298).

In line with this description of a good argument, the philosophers David Lanius and Romy Jaster name “ten rules for a good debate”:

1. Try to really understand
2. Stay on topic
3. Ask as many open questions as possible
4. Find common ground
5. Do not lecture your counterpart
6. Explain your point of view
7. Interpret favorably
8. Practice objective criticism
9. Deescalate
10. Change your perspective<sup>12</sup>

We do not find here a concrete distinction of when explaining becomes lecturing and vice versa; this seems to be a matter of social skills and context. Orientation toward mutual understanding is called for, as is the practice of (factual) argumentation. It seems as if a practical knowledge, a *vade mecum*, of discourse ethics is being formulated. The fact that Habermas is being popularized here is not without a certain irony.

Time and again, the selected texts refer to concrete behavioral and emotional states: Discursive competence is shown in composure and self-control; in refusing to lose one’s inhibitions; in controlling and insisting on tact, manners, and diplomacy; and in consideration and showing interest. Every political conflict obviously requires social skills. Therefore, the authors explain the sociomoral, even ethical, prerequisites of political dialogue. Frick links her considerations to a general, philosophically grounded “ethics of political opposition” (Frick 2017), which boils down to the importance of recognizing “the other” and understanding conflict or “agonism” as a productive feature of democratic pluralism.<sup>13</sup>

With regard to calls for a specific civility in political debates, the civil society initiative *Kleiner 5* formulates its programmatic motto as “radical politeness.”<sup>14</sup> Its booklets and leaflets also provide guidelines for dealing with right-wing populists.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. <https://forum-streitkultur.de/zehn-regeln-gute-debatte/>

<sup>13</sup> Unsurprisingly, Frick repeatedly refers to Chantal Mouffe (2007) and Hans Kelsen (2006) in her arguments.

<sup>14</sup> This initiative, which is supported by the association *Tadel Verpflichtet!*, founded in 2016, had been dedicated to the goal of politically containing the AfD—previously under 5%, hence the name.

In this context, radical politeness means “conducting heated discussions respectfully. It means acknowledging differences of opinion, seeking common ground, and thus bringing in one’s own democratic stance.”<sup>15</sup> At the same time, it means “actively opposing hatred and marginalization. After all, there is no need to talk at all costs.”<sup>16</sup> Acknowledgement, potential common ground, and taking a stand are again emphasized, and the option of a legitimate refusal to talk is mentioned.

The tips on what to do in the event of an encounter or dialogue in which another person expresses “right-wing populist” views are informative, too:

- “Tip 1: Stay calm to take the wind out of the sails of provocations
- Tip 2: Follow up to better understand your counterpart, discover similarities, and point out contradictions
- Tip 3: Explain your point of view—and demand the same from the other side
- Tip 4: Weigh your words: Pay attention to how your counterpart speaks and support those affected by right-wing populist prejudices
- Tip 5: Act instead of react: Advocate your issues—and break off the conversation if your counterpart is just ranting”<sup>17</sup>

It is once again important to argue decisively and objectively, to make one’s political positions clear, and, to a certain extent, to seek dialogue based on understanding. Deliberation, dialogue, and the ability to “give reasons” for one’s views and to argue objectively—in other words, the bourgeois skills of reflection, articulation, and affective self-government—are repeatedly brought into play against those who only “rant.” When one reads and interprets these guidelines and interventions, it becomes clear that the skills of self-control and self-discipline and of remaining polite, coherent, and curious while maintaining a democratic attitude and engaging in a quasididactic dialogue are profiled against “provocations,” “contradictions,” “prejudices,” and “ranting.”

These codes of conduct thus combine practical, didactic, and affect-political considerations with the ideal of discourse. Just as the argumentative skills of the addressees are to be trained—there are manuals with concrete arguments against common prejudices and resentments (von Kempis 2019)—the affective regulation of democrats is called for with equal vigor. Democrats are those who argue constructively and calmly. The aim is to “enter into dialogue with an open attitude” (von Kempis 2019, p. 20). Rationality, objectivity, and affect control are described as antipopulist traits. Antipopulists are open-minded, cool, and fact-oriented.

These rules of etiquette and manuals have become enormously widespread and popular; newspaper articles, podcasts, blogs, columns, etc., have taken up the theme—the Google Ngram Viewer, for example, marks a remarkable, steady increase in the use of the term “Streitkultur” in the twenty-first century.<sup>18</sup> More journalistically, in June 2021, an article in *Chrismon. Das evangelische Magazin*,

<sup>15</sup> <https://radikalehoefflichkeit.de>

<sup>16</sup> <https://radikalehoefflichkeit.de>

<sup>17</sup> <https://radikalehoefflichkeit.de>

<sup>18</sup> See for fun: [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Streitkultur&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2022&corpus=en&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Streitkultur&year_start=1800&year_end=2022&corpus=en&smoothing=3)

whose circulation of over 1.5 million and distribution as a free supplement to many newspapers in Germany should not be underestimated, summarized the relevant advice. It included expert opinions and presented key topoi—and once again illustrated the redundancy of this literature by stating the following:

- “Perhaps the most important rule: say less, ask more” (Holch and Greve 2021, p. 18).
- “Don’t interrupt, don’t react too quickly. It helps to lean back, both externally and internally” (Holch and Greve 2021, p. 18).
- “Emphasize similarities (‘we agree on that’); and create common ground through small talk (weather, children’s upbringing, hobbies)” (Holch and Greve 2021, p. 19).
- “Contact under certain conditions”; “Make sure you end the conversation before it turns into an argument. Oh, and don’t expect to convince the other person” (Holch and Greve 2021, p. 19).

There are repeated calls for composure, discipline, and didactic finesse. Trying to understand other opinions obviously means asking questions. It is also mentioned again that it is sometimes necessary to establish rules of dialogue, i.e., to move to a meta level of discourse. The person who is being addressed here functions both as a refereeing authority for the conduct of the discussion and as a participant, which creates an asymmetry, a strong imbalance in the discourse. Who decides when to stop a debate and when a political dispute is a social risk? Liberal democrats being trained and coached here can do this; communicative sovereignty belongs to them. Two things apply:

“In a liberal democracy, it is absolutely necessary to talk to those who think differently, but not always and under all circumstances. It is important, as is also clear, to first understand their ideas and conceptions and, depending on the situation and one’s own role, to take the risk of building communicative bridges. Even if you have a decidedly different opinion, perhaps and especially then” (Pörksen and Schulz von Thun 2020, p. 20).

In the sense of discourse sovereignty or competence, not only the option of breaking off a dialogue reappears but also the strategic—bourgeois—switch from political discussion to mere conversation. In the quoted paragraph, we find the notion of “small talk” to denote the production of sociability. Talking and understanding imply a general eagerness to find “common ground” and therefore, if necessary, to change the conflictual subject to something nonpolitical. On the one hand, this can interrupt the process of really understanding and engaging with the other’s political position, which helps to defuse and avoid political disputes. Interlocutors avoid harsh and conflictual antagonism; they avoid the abyss of resentment and hatred. On the other hand, these authors would argue that conversation enables a form of social bonding and makes discussion possible in the first place. When people get to know each other through friendly conversation, political opponents can be seen as people who think differently but who may also have children, go fishing, suffer from the constant rain, and so on. The pragmatics of speech acts is flanked by quite

pragmatic considerations of necessary sociability in everyday life. According to this view, political argument remains a social risk.

Nevertheless, within this genre of discourse manuals we find different and ambiguous positions when it comes to the expectations and impositions on the other person, the possible (populist) other, the dissident. *Kleiner 5*, for example, declares with great confidence in argumentation and rationality, “Justify your point of view—and demand the same from the other side,” and appeals to “point out contradictions” through critical questioning.<sup>19</sup> Other authors focus more on “open questions”; after all, one should not “lecture,” “convince,” or pressure someone. It seems as if the authors themselves are trying to maneuver around the asymmetry and normative intricacies of their narratively constructed discursive situation: Who decides on the topics and the change of topics? Who sets the rules for criticism, persuasion, harsh debate, and small talk? How can a teacher–student situation or a social–rhetorical hierarchy be avoided? Is the request to present comprehensible arguments already instructive, even asymmetrical? In other words: Has the demand for rationality become unreasonable or excessive today? What we find here is that the validity of Habermas’s validity claims has become questionable—the presupposition and pragmatic demand to claim truth, rightness, and sincerity seems to be in itself a problematic gesture of power.

In these texts we find particular social and discursive scenarios that lead to the question of communicative and social power. The addressees of these manuals are good, liberal, enlightened, and emotionally stable democrats; these (ideal) persons are being portrayed and coached. Preachers speak to unsettled converts. As antipopulists, they are supposed to acquire skills that make them communicatively superior. Their intended communicative control and superiority are also manifested in the repeatedly invoked gesture of wanting to understand. This leads to a significant shift in perspective, which the authors Pörksen and Schulz von Thun describe as follows: “The endeavor to understand replaces the dispute over truth. The primary goal of talking to each other is not to refute, but to acknowledge the other in their otherness, perhaps even their strangeness” (Pörksen and Schulz von Thun 2020, pp. 20–21). It is not necessary to resolve all conflicts or necessarily settle them, not even to convince the other side, but to recognize and acknowledge the other person.

The key question seems to be how people can reach such an understanding without necessarily being political and how to prevent escalation in the event of conflict. In this context, the authors Holch and Greve write that it is important to send “I-messages” (Holch and Greve 2021, p. 13). One should declare “I am surprised, perplexed, speechless.” Naming one’s own experiences, impressions, and feelings is said to be helpful because “experiences are more persuasive than pure facts anyway” (Holch and Greve 2021, p. 13). This idea is based on studies and experts who point to the need for an emotional understanding in the debate about how to deal with populists (or conspiracy theorists). The praise of emotional empathy is gaining ground. In line with this relativistic shift from argumentative persuasion and rational agreement to recognition, acknowledgment, and understanding, von

<sup>19</sup> <https://radikalehoefflichkeit.de>

Kempis writes, “It is not always easy to develop (and maintain) empathy for the perhaps contrary opinions of others” (von Kempis 2019, p. 20).

Empathy for contrary opinions seems to be more than just a funny expression—it points to an underlying (vernacularized) psychologization that understands empathy not as a starting point of conflictual discussion but as a matter of emotional transfer. Such psychologization pervades the genre. For example, Lanius and Jaster flank their “measures” on how to counter “fake news” not only with a call to “live a democratic culture of debate” (Jaster and Lanius 2019, p. 102) but also with a call to “critical thinking” (Jaster and Lanius 2019, pp. 104–105) that requires “familiarizing ourselves with the basic features of our psychological make-up and the many biases that influence our thinking and perception” (Jaster and Lanius 2019, p. 105). This emphasis on psychological factors is recurrent: One is not only to affirm a modest degree of pluralism and socially acceptable conflict, to accept political opponents and learn to debate with them, but also to see through human shortcomings and try to show recognition, acknowledgement, understanding, and even empathy for motives, and therefore not just for rational reasons.

## 5 Conclusion: Politicizing Empathy or Depoliticizing Discourse

Today’s antipopulist codes of conduct are being formulated at a time when we are discussing a “rise of affectivism” (Dukes et al. 2021) and an “affective turn” (Clough and Halley 2007). Affect has become a major focus of academic research, whether in neurology, history, or the social sciences. There is sometimes critical talk of a “liberal emotional dispositive” (Sauer 1999; Bargetz 2018), of necessary “‘passions’ in politics” (Mouffe 2007), of a “society of rage” (Koppetsch 2019), of the “worries and fears” of right-wing populist voters, and of the seductions of the “righteous mind” (Haidt 2012). We find a quasitherapeutic, social–psychological dimension of “respectful encounters,” of “wanting to understand,” and of “building trust.” Fittingly, the philosopher Åsa Wikforss (2020) adds psychological theories to her reflections on how to deal with fake news; for example, she points out, “What is needed is an atmosphere of respect and trust in order to convey knowledge and get people to listen to our arguments.” Furthermore, in “Strangers in Their Own Land” (Hochschild 2016),<sup>20</sup> Arlie Russell Hochschild argues for “overcoming the empathy wall” (Hochschild 2016, p. 5). Understanding each another while remaining self-critical is seen as necessary. Thus, the academic and political imperative no longer seems to be to deconstruct a *false consciousness* or even to fight political opponents but rather to show *understanding* for their history, their feelings, and their “deep story” up to a certain point.

Not surprisingly, this “affectivism” is reflected in today’s popular academic and journalistic writing. Although empathy is a notion of proximity and familiarity

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<sup>20</sup> Hochschild visited Trump voters in rural Louisiana because she no longer wanted to be outraged but to understand their “deep story”: Arguments, political views, and identities are based on self-narratives and idiosyncratic self-images. These result from experiences, disappointments, feelings, sensitivities, solidified narratives—and ultimately from milieus and biographies.

and thus not very deeply rooted in ideas of the (bourgeois) public sphere (Hume 2007; Hartmann 2013), it is constantly mobilized. Significantly, popular publications neglect any sharp distinction between the public sphere and the close range of social interactions. There is little distinction between the political and the personal or private. The idea of empathetic sociality repeatedly refers to the lifeworld, the social world—this is where people meet and experience political conflict, not in an abstract arena or public sphere. The challenge of populism is seen as a problem of the behavior, motivations, and interactions of individuals. Empathy then functions as an asymmetrical concept of antipopulism and new bourgeois self-descriptions.

If we were to confront Jürgen Habermas's thought with the popular discourse ethics of everyday life, we would find a tension between the validity claims to truth, rightness, and sincerity (Habermas 1984, p. 307); these are set in motion and shift. On the one hand, we have read, "Ask questions in order to better understand your counterpart, discover similarities and point out contradictions" and "Justify your point of view—and demand the same from the other side."<sup>21</sup> The demand for justification requires people to at least try to rationalize their "deep story" and make it understandable to others. On the other hand, the codes of conduct examined here problematize the very claim that positions can be formulated in a rational discourse. Since certain political views of populist supporters cannot be understood by means of arguments but are seen and framed as products of resentment, hatred, anger, or blatant "ranting,"<sup>22</sup> we are called upon to empathetically recognize and acknowledge people and their underlying problems, conflicts, or motivations—or, in the worst case, to stop talking. Habermas's idea of intersubjectivity runs the risk of regressing to an ultimately shared, communicatively mediated subjectivity. Thus, the universalist conception of communication and the ideal of a possible rational consensus are abandoned, and what is more, we detect an increasingly important claim to *sincerity*.

These discourse manuals analyzed here exhibit a symptomatic problem: While intending to promote ways of political engagement and better understanding, they formulate tips that *undermine* or *block* both political conflict and understanding, albeit to varying degrees. Some of the key quotes I have presented underline that this strand of literature conspicuously promotes avoidance methods: no lectures, no ideal of persuasive argument, and no anger, but deescalation and asking questions—in short, being nice to each other for as long as possible to keep conflict at a socially acceptable level. But if we give up the *ideal* of persuasion, of rational consensus, we are limited to recognizing irreconcilable feelings, experiences, and points of view. If we also avoid harsh conflicts, we allow the false consciousness, the delusion, and the ideological blindness of the other to persist. Then this concept of facing the challenges of populist attacks on democracy is neither truly agonistic nor Habermasian but runs the risk of being apolitical—it avoids working through existing conflicts with the necessary vehemence or rationality.

Where rationality and argumentation no longer serve as binding modes of discourse (analytical and academic), communication increasingly becomes an expres-

<sup>21</sup> As quoted above: <https://radikalehoeflichkeit.de>

<sup>22</sup> <https://radikalehoeflichkeit.de>

sive issue. The old-fashioned idea that even moral issues could be judged “impartially” from a “moral point of view” (Habermas 1985, p. 1042) is challenged by reference to subjective narratives, “deep stories,” and self-narrations, while political conflicts can or should be smoothed over by individual “I-messages” that are difficult to challenge. Both the Habermasians and the adherents of agonistic democracy must groan, for the thrust of today’s bourgeois codes of conduct can be interpreted as a kind of post-Habermasian discourse ethics that subversively undermines its own intention.<sup>23</sup>

**Funding** Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

**Conflict of interest** A. Séville declares that she has no competing interests.

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<sup>23</sup> Think of Habermas’s model of discourse, according to which “practical discourse can be understood as a process of communication which, in its form, *simultaneously* encourages *all* participants to assume ideal roles. It thus transforms Mead’s ideal role-taking, which *everyone* undertakes *individually* and *privately*, into a *public* event practiced intersubjectively by all” (Habermas 1985, p. 1043); italics in the original text.

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