

Blogs, genes and immigration: Online media and minimal politics

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Abstract

This article explores the contribution of the concept of ‘minimal politics’ to understanding contemporary blogging. Politics is often used to refer only to state actions or to very rare ruptures to existing formations; citizens’ and social media are often only considered successful if they influence political leaders or lead to radical social change. The perspective adopted in this article, drawing on theories of agonistic democracy and hegemony, foregrounds the apparently quotidian ways in which current formations are destabilized. To explore the smallest radically democratic practices of contesting what appears to be a current hegemonic formation, the article analyses blog coverage of the publication in Germany of Thilo Sarrazin’s book *Deutschland schafft sich ab*. The book, celebrated by some sections of the media and population, argued that the genetic transmission of intelligence and the high number of Muslim immigrants in Germany was leading to the demise of the country. Analysis identified three strategies utilized by blogs to contest the Sarrazin case: rebutting, reflecting, re-articulating. The political aspect of blogging, it is argued, should not be reduced to moments of rupture or moments of consensus, but also encompass the practices of tearing apparently tiny fissures in current media/social constellations.

Keywords

agonism, blogging, Germany, migration, new media, radical democracy

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The 2011 revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and neighbouring countries have brought blogging and other social and citizens' media to the forefront of the public imagination. Major news corporations have interviewed bloggers and drawn heavily on Twitter and Facebook. Social media have been celebrated as creating or, at the very least, fuelling the revolutionary movements. On the other hand, 'pre-revolutionary' scholarship on blogs and other forms of online journalism, citizens' media and user-generated content argued that they were unsuccessful because they did not appear on the radar of commercial media and/or have not themselves become big media, accessed by a large number of readers/users. Compared to traditional news media, blogs and user-generated content are far less visible and have far fewer individual readers (see Rebillard and Touboul, 2010); control over the news landscape remains in the hands of the print, television or radio journalists and editors (Chung, 2007); most links from blogs go to traditional news media, that is, the websites of commercial newspapers (Reese et al., 2007). For some observers this means that journalism 2.0 has not lived up to its promise (Rebillard and Touboul, 2010).

These two apparently opposing arguments draw on the same logic: media are considered political if, and only if, they have a major impact on political decision-makers and the public sphere. They overlap, albeit for the most part without acknowledgement and with quite incompatible epistemological orientations, with contemporary theorists such as Badiou (2005), Rancière (1999) or Žižek (2000). The latter argue that 'politics proper' is 'the moment in which a particular demand is not simply part of the negotiation of interests but aims at something more, and starts to function as the metaphoric condensation of the global restructuring of the entire social space' (Žižek, 2000: 248). Where traditional definitions see politics as 'the art of the possible', this perspective defines authentic politics as 'the art of the *impossible* – it changes the very parameters of what is considered "possible" in the existing constellation' (2000: 237, original emphasis).

The role of social media in the revolutions in the Arab world, radically changing what is considered possible, can clearly be theorized within this frame. The danger for media analysis is that we then forget about the political import of mundane, quotidian everyday practices: they no longer fit within the notion of politics. But does a particular demand necessarily have to 'start to function' for a set of practices to count as authentic politics? What follows if we define the 'aim at something more', the *aim* to function as the metaphoric condensation of the restructuring of social space, as one sufficient criterion for politics proper rather than the *fulfilment* of this aim? In this article, we turn attention to the apparently banal and mundane aspects of social life (see Billig, 1995; Silverman, 1999). Drawing on the analysis of one particular case study, we argue that the concept of 'minimal politics' (Marchart, 2010), rooted in hegemony theory, can open new avenues for exploring the blogosphere and other forms of new media. These avenues extend and complement the existing interest in online communication, deliberative democracy and the public sphere.

Our interest in linking hegemony theory with political blogging was heightened by recent media attention in Germany to Thilo Sarrazin's (2010) book *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (*Germany Does Away with Itself*). The book touches on migration, genetics, social welfare and educational attainment, arguing that Germany is becoming increasingly less intelligent primarily because people on welfare and Muslim immigrants are

having more children than university-educated Germans. At the time of publication, Sarrazin was a member of Germany's SPD (Social Democratic Party) and a member of the board of the German National Bank. During his tenure as Finance Minister for Berlin, his provocative views on social and demographic policies were regularly discussed in the media. This new book had the potential to contribute to an ongoing shift in the public discussion about migration, which is, across all sections of society, increasingly supporting populist, xenophobic, anti-Muslim views (Decker et al., 2010; Heitmeyer, 2010).

Recent studies on anti-immigration discourse in Europe and beyond support the observation of this ongoing shift. They have shown how immigrants are systematically portrayed as 'the other' across national mediascapes (Teo, 2000) and how immigration is increasingly perceived as a 'threat' or even a 'disaster' in populist media (Charteris-Black, 2006; Jäger, 2009). Instead of, for instance, taking international migration as a matter of fact in a globalized world, or stressing the socio-economic benefits, immigration is increasingly articulated with societies' fears. Buonfino (2004) argues that this 'securitization of migration', that is, seeing immigration as a security concern and a threat to national cohesion and economic success, has become hegemonic in Europe. It is expressed not only in the media and public opinion, but also in concrete immigration policies in Italy and the UK (Buonfino, 2004), for example, and in the European Union (Geddes, 2007).

A similar trend has been observed in Germany. Analysis of media discourse on immigration has identified a high level of boundary-drawing along ethnic and religious lines (Jäger, 2009; Korteweg and Yurdakul, 2009). These findings are supported by public opinion polls and longitudinal studies. Anti-Muslim and xenophobic attitudes have been measured among around 25 percent of the German public since 2002, with a rising tendency especially among higher-income groups (Heitmeyer, 2010; cf. Pollack, 2010). Over half of the German public reports feeling economically threatened by immigrants and people on welfare (Decker et al., 2010; Heitmeyer, 2010). With the publication of Sarrazin's book, the securitization discourse that is reflected by these numbers hit a peak in Germany. In September 2010, a major German polling firm measured anti-Muslim opinions among around 55 percent of the German public (see de Luca, 2010).¹

A few weeks earlier, sections of *Deutschland schafft sich ab* had been pre-published by the two most-cited German news media, the *Bild Zeitung* and *Spiegel*. On the one hand, the book received a massive amount of public attention, was a bestseller before it was even published, and was reportedly greeted with enthusiasm by large sections of the population. The central argument was that someone had finally dared to directly address the problems of Muslim integration in Germany. On the other hand, Sarrazin's position was vocally criticized as being social Darwinist, racist and Islamophobic. Particularly noticeable was that most political and media blogs in Germany immediately adopted a critical position towards the Sarrazin story. Our empirical interest, in the second half of this article, lies in identifying the strategies utilized by blogs to contest this story. Our theoretical interest lies in relating this to hegemony theory, and in considering how the situated strategies of contestation contribute to a more general understanding of the relation between (online) news media and (democratic) politics.

To this end, we turn first to the theoretical background of 'minimal politics' in agonistic democracy, outlining features of the emerging second wave of hegemony studies in

media analysis. The central section of the article then explores the concept of minimal politics in more detail, grounded in an analysis of what we will call ‘the Sarrazin case’.

Deliberative democracy and/or agonistic democracy

Deliberative democracy remains the leading orientation in contemporary English-language studies of media and politics (see Hindman, 2008). The intricacies of the debate between theorists of deliberative democracy and theorists of agonism or radical democracy have been documented in detail elsewhere (e.g. Norval, 2007). Here, we aim simply to sketch the contours of the two orientations. Despite differences among the various approaches to deliberative democracy, they share a set of similar preoccupations (see Dahlgren, 2005; Flew, 2009). They suggest that to strengthen democracy, an increasing number of citizens should participate actively in the public sphere, that is, in open public discussions on political decisions which are to be made. One central aim is to reach, through rational deliberation, some sort of acceptable agreement or consensus on potential courses of action. Public policies are considered legitimate, democratic and just when they are the result of active participation among equals.

Theorists of radical or agonistic democracy, in which democracy is seen as a space of disagreement, have criticized this approach to democracy on three main grounds (see Laclau, 2006; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001 [1985]; Mouffe, 2000; see also Fraser, 2005; Meehan, 1995). First, rather than aiming to reach rational consensus, they are interested in the dislocatory potential of argumentation. Second, rather than assuming that unrestrained dialogue is possible and that power can be challenged in public discourse, they assume that power is irreducibly at work in all relations. Third, they believe that an excessive emphasis on consensus can lead to political apathy and the malaise of political disengagement in contemporary democracies. Various suggestions have been made for ways to make notions of antagonism, disagreement, lack, etc. fruitful for expanding the processes of (democratic) politicization (e.g. Laclau, 1990; Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 1999). Recent studies in political theory, such as Norval’s (2007) ‘aversive democracy’, emphasize the need to integrate deliberative and agonistic approaches in order to engage with the inherent tension in democratic practice between deliberation (stressing consensus, governance) and agonism (stressing disruption, denaturalization).

Second wave hegemony studies

Grappling with this tension, a second wave of hegemony-theoretical approaches to media has emerged. It prioritizes dislocation and conflict over agreement and consensus, and orients towards agonistic or aversive rather than deliberative democracy (see Macgilchrist, 2011: 10). In the 1970s and 1980s, studies drawing on the concept of hegemony saw mainstream (Western) journalism primarily as an agent of ‘hegemonic ideology’ or domination. In their critique of news reporting, they considered journalists to be ideological agents who drew readers or viewers to agree with the ruling elites by consensus rather than by force (Glasgow University Media Group [GUMG], 1976; Hall, 2005 [1982]). For Gitlin, ‘[s]imply by doing their jobs, journalists tend to serve

the political and economic elite definitions of reality' (1980: 12). Drawing on Gramsci (1971) and Williams (1977), these approaches adopt an active notion of hegemony which is seen to operate 'through a complex web of social activities and institutional procedures' (Gitlin, 1980: 10). Studies pointed out that readers of course do not unthinkingly swallow mediated messages; media users negotiate or reject parts or the entirety of media stories (Hall, 1980). Nevertheless, their concept of hegemony was primarily oriented to the securing of consensus for the already dominant elites.

Recent studies emphasize a more dynamic, (even) less deterministic understanding of hegemony. For Lull (2000), for instance, hegemony, as a method for gaining and maintaining power, is fragile, requiring renewal and modification to remain effective. Karppinen stresses Mouffe's emphasis that 'every consensus is provisional and exists as a temporal result of a provisional hegemony' (2007: 500; see also Carpentier and Cammaerts, 2006). Sreberny draws on Laclau and Mouffe's work on articulation and antagonism, considering that it provides a 'more labile and less firmly situated' notion of hegemony than the first wave of hegemony analysis of media (2008: 116). For Sreberny, this approach allows for continuous change, albeit small and perhaps not apparent, because hegemonic articulation is constantly accompanied by counter-articulation in alternative spaces. Precisely because the news media constantly reiterate social relations and formations, hegemony studies are beginning to focus not only on dominant constructions, but also on the 'gaps and fissures [which] are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions' (Butler, 1993: 10).

Rodriguez (2001), although not explicitly prioritizing hegemony, was one of the first to reinvigorate this attention to 'fissures in the mediascape'. She urges scholars to direct their attention away from the ways in which citizens' media affect (or do not) the media megaliths, and towards 'understanding how citizens' media activate subtle processes of fracture in the social, cultural, and power spheres of everyday life' (Rodriguez, 2001: xiv). We agree, *pace* much contemporary research on political blogs and other forms of online journalism, that the measure of success for non-mainstream media can no longer be their impact on political leaders or major media corporations. To counteract these traditional criteria, we draw on Marchart's (2010) concept of 'minimal politics', developed in terms of social movements and political activism, to open a further avenue to investigate how blogs participate in politics and the political. Our focus lies on how media shift social relations and political constructions, and thus contest and challenge (precarious, partial) hegemonic formations.

Minimal politics

Marchart has elaborated an extended definition of minimal politics, the minimal criteria required for an action to be considered *political* (Marchart, 2010: 289–328).² He positions minimal politics somewhere between 'big politics' and 'micro-politics'. Clearly there is more to politics than the actions of states or political leaders. True politics, however, should in Marchart's view also not be reserved for those very rare moments of radical upheaval (Badiou, 2005; Rancière, 1999; Žižek, 2000). Micro-politics, on the other hand, is such a broad concept that it is in danger of losing its analytical purchase. To this end, he proposes five criteria of minimal politics.

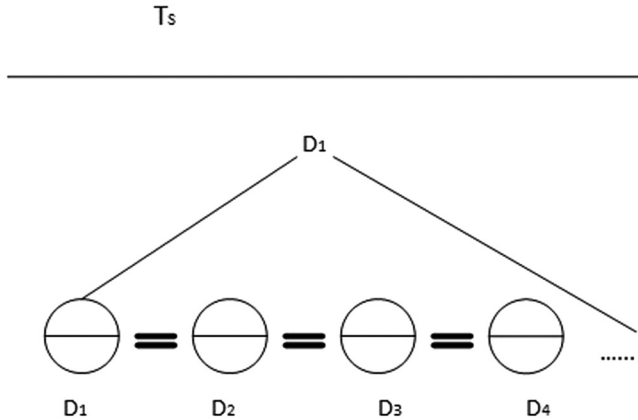


Figure 1. Chain of equivalences

First, the aim of *becoming a majority*. This kind of politics aims to take on a majority, or hegemonic, position in the political landscape and to have a large number of participants. In this sense, it aims to transform the contemporary social order. This aim is not to be confused with actually empirically attaining a majority or hegemonic position. It is the aim which distinguishes political practices from friendship or other group practices. The latter are happy to remain at a particular size and do not aim to significantly alter the symbolic landscape or dislocate familiar discursive formations such as neoliberalism, racism, sexism or other forms of exclusion and discrimination. By aiming to contest the current majority/hegemonic position, however, even the very smallest of apparently unsuccessful practices is political since it forces the currently predominant set of relations to work at maintaining their (always only precariously) hegemonic position.

Second, *strategy*. Politics consists not of ad hoc actions, but of actions which are in some way linked to – or linkable with – broader or longer-term strategies which challenge conventional symbolic forms, rituals or institutions. These actions thus demonstrate the contingency of conventions. Strategies contesting traditional ways of doing and saying are also linked to the aim of establishing new institutions and practices.

Third, politics must have some sense of *organization*. For Gramsci, organization refers to the organization of the proletariat and the formation of new hegemonic alliances. For Laclau and Mouffe, for whom class struggle is no longer central, organization refers to the articulation of diverse elements into chains of equivalences. Figure 1 presents a simplified diagram of this set of relations (from Laclau, 1999: 303).

In Laclau's well-known example from pre-1917 Russia, the diagram represents a situation of oppression. T_s stands for the Tsarist regime. When workers demand higher wages, their demand (D_1) is split into a particular demand for higher pay, and a more universal dimension of anti-system activity. D_2 represents the students' demand for relaxed discipline in education, D_3 the liberal politicians' demand for freedom of the press, etc. These demands are separate from one another in their particularity, and linked in their anti-system meaning. On the other side of the antagonistic line is T_s , the oppressive regime. In

this logic, an antagonistic opponent is always necessary to universalize particular demands. Without something which is interpreted as an oppressive regime, there can be no anti-regime meaning/activity, and each demand would simply be different from the others. Organization thus refers to the linking of demands into a chain of equivalences. The diagram serves as useful orientation for the analysis below.

The fourth criterion of minimal politics is *collectivity*. As with the aim of becoming a majority, the collective dimension of political action need not be understood as an empirical collection of individuals, but as a symbolic collective; as the symbol of a collective actor. In the 1980s, for example, Solidarność and its symbols came to represent a collective actor far broader than the dock workers in Gdansk.³

Finally, the fifth and sixth criteria can be collapsed together: *conflictuality* and *positionality*. These draw on the above definition of the political as the dimension of antagonism constitutive of the social, and on Figure 1 which indicates that a chain of equivalences can only function as a chain when opposed to a radically external (antagonistic) other. Since politics therefore always includes a dimension of conflict, actors will need to take up a position within this conflict.

Drawing these six minimal criteria together, politics thus refers to organized collective strategy which positions itself in a conflict in order to become majoritarian; or, in short, to what could be called *hegemonic projects*. This now sounds quite far from the everyday practices of a political blogger. From our observation of blog activity, and more specifically, our analysis of German blogs' reactions to the Sarrazin case in 2010, however, we argue that this definition of politics helps in considering blogging (or online journalism) in a new light. Much of what has hitherto been dismissed as inadequate or unsuccessful appears as the tearing of small rips in what is considered possible in the current constellation. The analysis below explores this in more depth.

Corpus

Observing the political and media blogosphere in Germany, it was clear that the majority was critically oriented to the Sarrazin case. Our descriptive research question thus aimed to identify the strategies utilized by blogs to contest the story.⁴ We identified 'top blogs' by referring to the blog rankings on wikio.de (wikio.de, 2010a, 2010b) and the German Blog Charts (deutscheblogcharts, 2010). Blogs are ranked according to how many incoming links they have on current posts (excluding links on blogrolls). Since several blogs in the charts covered culture or entertainment and did not post on the Sarrazin case, we selected the top ten in 'politics' and 'media' according to wikio.de. Our corpus thus comprised the top ten political and top ten media blogs from September 2010. Of the 20 blogs, 12 returned at least one post on 'Sarrazin'; a total of 123 posts.⁵

Analysis

There are, of course, numerous ways of analysing the blog entries in order to find strategies of contestation. Through the lens provided by hegemony theory, our analysis highlights a set of three strategies which challenge the Sarrazin case.⁶ First, *rebutting*

the arguments of others, second, *reflecting* on the discursive or media strategies in operation and, third, *re-articulating* the concepts and positions articulated by others. In the conclusion, we discuss the implications of these strategies for conceptualizing the role of new media in the political arena.

Rebut

The first and most straightforward way to challenge an opponent is to negate – or rebut – their claims. Bildblog.de's long-term strategy, for instance, is to rebut the arguments of the *Bild Zeitung* by locating and correcting its mistakes and inconsistencies every day. Given that Bildblog is one of the leading German blogs, with 1,813,218 page impressions from 16 September to 16 October 2010, it clearly fits the criteria of collective action in conflict with its antagonist the *Bild Zeitung*.

Across the blogs in our corpus, rebutting is a widely used strategy to contest the Sarrazin case. Extract 1, from nachdenkseiten.de, illustrates a particularly direct rebut, which claims that the statistics or science used by Sarrazin are flawed. Extract (2) illustrates a more playful rebut.

Extract 1

There is no integration disaster in Germany

Are Muslims really more poorly integrated than other migrants? How much use are Sarrazin's statistics? The discussion is going in completely the wrong direction, says scholar Klaus Bade. In an interview he explains why integration in Germany is more successful than critics claim:

Among men without migration background 50.3% are employed; women 37.5%. Among male Turkish immigrants approximately 45.1% are employed; females 23.5%. In addition, there is a large number of relatives who help out in small family businesses who are not recorded in the statistics... 'Migrant groups' per se do not exist. What can be identified are milieus within immigrants from different regions. These milieus can also be identified among the population without migration background... I don't see any integration disaster in Germany. As the recent annual report by the Advisory Council for German Foundations for Integration and Migration demonstrates, integration in Germany is far more successful than the disintegration polemicists want us to believe, even in international comparisons. (nachdenkseiten 16/16, 9. Sept. 2010; original italics and bold in all extracts; all extracts our translation)

In this example, as in many others, the blog re-posts a text from other news media which explicitly challenges the facticity of Sarrazin's claims. The blog adds its own headline, again explicitly rebutting the claims. It also adds a final comment:

So, to be blunt: who do you think is more competent? Dr. Thilo Sarrazin or Prof. Dr. Klaus J. Bade, Prof. Dr. Ursula Neumann, Prof. Dr. Michael Bommes, Prof. Dr. Heinz Faßmann, Prof. Dr. Yasemin Karakasoglu, Prof. Dr. Christine Langenfeld, Prof. Dr. Werner Schiffauer, or Prof. Dr. Steven Vertovec of the Advisory Council for German Foundations for Integration and Migration.

The three source texts and this list of names draw all six criteria for ‘minimal politics’ together: the aim to become majoritarian in the explicit invitation to readers to join the longer list of names of those who support the extract rather than the lone Sarrazin; the organization and collectivity, articulated in the chain of equivalences drawn among the professors, the argument and the expert committee on integration and migration; the conflictuality and positionality, constructing Sarrazin as the antagonist; and the strategic, non-ad-hoc nature of the argument, supported by credible institutions and individuals.

A second means of rebutting which also resonates with these criteria is to pick apart an argument line for line. The blog *weissgarnix.de* does this in an entry of over 3000 words which engages with an article in the major daily newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)* by two psychologists Heiner Rindermann and Detlef Rost. Sarrazin’s book relies to a large extent on their research. In the *FAZ* article the psychologists outline their support for particular aspects of Sarrazin’s argument. The blog post cites and replies to aspects of this article.

Extract 2

[...] A glance at the data on which Rindermann draws shows more inconsistencies. He draws on Richard Lynn’s ‘IQ and the Wealth of Nations’:

Central to the book’s thesis is a tabulation of what Lynn and Vanhanen believe to be the average IQs of the world’s nations. Rather than do their own IQ studies (a potentially massive project), the authors average and adjust existing studies.

You what? Average and adjust?

For 104 of the 185 nations, no studies were available. In those cases, the authors have used an estimated value by taking averages of the IQs of neighbouring or comparable nations.

Huh?? Seriously?

To obtain a figure for South Africa, the authors averaged IQ studies done on different ethnic groups, resulting in a figure of 72.

Ah, okay, I see. SA consists of such-and-such percent whites, so you take the average of the whites in the USA and weight that. Science.

For People’s Republic of China, the authors used a figure of 109.4 for Shanghai and adjusted it down by an arbitrary 6 points because they believed the average across China’s rural areas was probably less than that in Shanghai.

Science? Statistics? Art?

In some cases, the IQ of a country is estimated by averaging the IQs of countries that are not actually neighbours of the country in question. For example, Kyrgyzstan’s IQ is estimated by averaging the IQs of Iran and Turkey, neither of which is close to Kyrgyzstan. China, which is a geographic neighbour, is not counted as such by Lynn and Vanhanen. This is presumably because the ethnic groups of the area speak Iranian and Turkic languages, but do not include Chinese.

Diddle diddle dee the way I like it.

To account for the Flynn effect (an increase in IQ scores over time), the authors adjusted the results of older studies upward by a number of points.

Urgh, sorry, I stopped reading here.

(weissgarnix.de 2, 8 Sept. 2010)

In extract 2, weissgarnix playfully picks apart the central thesis of Lynn's *IQ and the Wealth of Nations*, which is one of the sources for Lindemann's work. The blog draws on popular sources (Wikipedia, Pippi Longstocking's phrase 'Ich mach' mir die Welt // Widdewidde wie sie mir gefällt' [I make myself the world // diddle diddle dee the way I like it]), informal language (You what? Huh?), multiple embedded deconstructions (of Lynn who is cited by Rindermann who is cited by Sarrazin), and direct interaction with readers (sorry, I stopped reading here). Interweaving these discursive elements serves to rebut Rindermann's – and thus Sarrazin's – claims.

Reflect

Whereas rebutting often operates by re-posting extracts from other blogs/media, reflecting on discursive mechanisms which relate the Sarrazin case to broader social formations is invariably expressed in authored blog entries, such as the following.

Extract 3

What can we learn from Thilo S.? We live in an age of the normative power of the public sphere. Facticity has become far less important than the power of going public. The American satirist Stephen Colbert created the word 'truthiness' years ago. Truthiness refers to 'truths' that come from a gut feeling and do not need to stand up to rational, logical or factual verification. If these 'truths' are repeated loudly and often enough, they become reality in people's minds. Thanks to truthiness, it is not only opinions that everyone is free to hold. Now everyone is also free to decree their own facts.

Imaginary facts, like those that Thilo S. put into the world, are a problem for public discourse. If one is no longer allowed to refute arguments by comparing them with reality, the discussions become arbitrary. **It is no longer plausibility but volume which determines the strongest argument.** The more a truthiness resonates in the sound box of the public sphere, and the more it serves possible prejudices in a short and sweet way, the more it turns into the truth. An imaginary dictum can quickly become psychological reality within the structures of the modern attention economy. In just this way, a large part of the American population now believes in the absurd claim that Barack Obama is Muslim. (carta 23, 1 Sept. 2010)

This blog entry, headlined 'Sarrazin and the normative power of supermemes in the public sphere', uses the Sarrazin case as a springboard to reflect on today's 'attention economy' (*Aufmerksamkeitsökonomie*). This, the blog argues, signals the end of 'truth' and its replacement by 'truthiness'. The plausibility of an argument no longer determines its strength, but the volume with which it is expressed. For this blog, the Sarrazin case is one aspect of contemporary society on which 'we' can reflect and from which we can

learn. The text ends with the plea that ‘we, those who would like to discuss our society, raise ourselves above truthiness and spurious arguments, and no longer allow our debating culture to be dictated by professional demagogues’. The Sarrazin case thus plays a role in the discursive separation of political/social bloggers and other members of the ‘we’-group from the mainstream media. A similar case is made on netzpiloten.de.

Extract 4

I was there when Thilo Sarrazin recharged a never-ending outdated argument with archaic fears. At the same time, the decision was made that nuclear power stations with an extremely high frequency of hazardous incidents will be allowed to have them for a few more years. I was there when the CDU’s Miss Prysseus publicly bad-mouthed the Polish Representative for Germany without having ever met him personally. At the same time, the decision was made that people and families receiving welfare would receive less money from the state.

I was there when the media’s knee-jerk reaction to both of these was drawn out for weeks and the real news with major repercussions for entire regions and sections of the population were pushed into ‘other news’ and ‘meanwhile’.

I will no longer be there when these media try to tell me they are accomplishing a democratic duty. I no longer differentiate between the allegedly quality press and the allegedly tabloid rags. It is obvious what is happening. Readership figures and television ratings decide what media content counts as relevant for democracy. (netzpiloten.de 1, 20 Sept. 2010)

Netzpiloten’s argument is focused more precisely on the undemocratic nature of contemporary news media. It repeatedly uses the phrase ‘I was there’ (*Ich war dabei*) associated with responsibility for the Holocaust (see Pausewang, 2004; Schönhuber, 1981). The blog draws attention to other political events which happened at the same time as the Sarrazin case. While the latter was attracting major headlines and front-page attention, these political changes were relegated to other sections of the papers.

In both of these extracts, bloggers are positioning themselves on a meta-level above or beyond ‘the media’ and the ‘attention economy’. By reflecting on, and contesting, media coverage in this way blogs are positioned as second-order observers (Luhmann, 2000), observing how others observe events. Blogs observe here how the public or the media observe the arguments made by Sarrazin and his supporters; and how this sustains an attention economy. By reflecting critically on these observations, however, they open a fissure in the mediascape; by opening space for the tensions to become apparent, they impede the smooth running – if it ever did run smoothly – of the (mediated) attention economy.

Re-articulate

From a hegemony theoretical perspective, the most immediately striking strategy for contesting the Sarrazin case is to re-articulate concepts or positions which are circulating in the media. Re-articulation redraws lines of conflict, creating new chains of equivalences and new antagonistic others. Sarrazin’s book links into one chain of equivalence: Sarrazin himself, as a democratic citizen and politician, German citizens wishing the best for the

country, Germany's potential to enable individuals to excel (in science, technology, etc.) in the future, and the economic success for the country this would entail. The antagonism to this chain is a second chain of equivalences linking uneducated Muslim immigrants with welfare scroungers who produce copious numbers of children. Mapped onto Figure 1, this would line up the demands of democracy, excellence and economic success as D_1 , D_2 , D_3 on one side of the line, with welfare-scroungers-uneducated-immigrants-children on the other side.

Several blogs in our analysis contested this by re-articulating the elements into new chains of equivalences, three of which we examine more closely here: social democracy, National Socialism and anti-capitalism. In the first, the link between Sarrazin and social democracy is broken. Extract 5 gives one example.

Extract 5

You really have to pinch yourself to understand that this is not just a bad dream: The SPD, which in *Godesberg* listed Christian ethics, humanism and classical philosophy as its intellectual roots, is now not only contaminated by neoliberal ideas, but also with ideas that are critical of humanism (yes, even anti-humanist), whose propagators long for nothing more than to remain for the rest of their lives in social democracy.

Should one kick such faithful souls out of bed? (carta 14, 6 Sept. 2010 and nachdenkseiten 14/13, 10 Sept. 2010)

The extract, first posted on the blog magda.de, then re-posted on carta and nachdenkseiten, progresses in four steps. First, an orienting sentence gives the evaluative direction (like a 'bad dream'). Second, the SPD (Social Democratic Party) is articulated with its tradition of Christian ethics, humanism and classical philosophy. Third, the clear negation ('not only ... but also') and strongly evaluative words ('contaminated', 'yes, even') position neoliberal and anti-humanist ideas as the other of the SPD. Finally, the question is raised whether these 'propagators' (including Sarrazin) should be kicked out of the bed that is social democracy. Sarrazin is disarticulated from democracy and explicitly re-articulated with anti-humanist ideas and neoliberal thinking. On the other side of the line of antagonism, social democracy's link with the implicitly positive values of Christian ethics, humanism and classical philosophy is simultaneously re-articulated.

The second set of attempts to disarticulate Sarrazin from democracy were numerous blog posts which linked his book, and the media and public comments on its ideas, with National Socialism or the new right. One of the strongest to do this posts two excerpts alongside one another, including the following.

Extract 6

The birth rate sank in Germany from over 1.3 million p.a. in the first half of the 1960s to 650 000 in 2009.... That the aging and shrinking of the German population is accompanied by a qualitative change in its constitution was overlooked for too long. In addition to the decreasing population, the future of Germany is also endangered by the continual increase in the less stable, less intelligent and less competent [*tüchtig*]. (Sarrazin)

Extract 7

Although we had around 2 million births p.a. at the turn of the century, today it is only around 975 000.... Our people is undeniably aging quickly. However, it is not only the number which is worrying, but also the quality and composition of our German population.... In addition, it is precisely the feeble-minded and inferior people who exhibit above-average reproduction rates.... This means that the more gifted, valuable tier of each generation is decreasing and in a few generations will be virtually extinct, and with it achievements and the German culture....

The Germans would have basically done away with themselves [Die Deutschen hätten sich damit quasi abgeschafft]. (Frick)

The similarities are clear between extract 6, Sarrazin quoted in the *Bild Zeitung*, and extract 7 from the Interior Minister of the German Reich, Dr Wilhelm Frick in his speech in 1933 to the Advisory Council for Population and Race Politics. Both note decreasing populations, both describe aging Germans, both worry that the less intelligent and inferior are having more children and endangering the future of the country. Posting these extracts together, and highlighting Frick's phrase which recalls the title of Sarrazin's book, clearly articulates the latter with National Socialist eugenics. Although no antagonist is explicitly named on the other side of the line of antagonism, the weight of history and the 'long conversation' (Maybin, 1996) about National Socialism in Germany, implicitly place Sarrazin and Frick opposite democracy and a range of similar positively valued traits.

A third set of blogs contests the Sarrazin case by articulating chains of equivalences around an anti-capitalist position.

Extract 9

Get worked up about something else instead: debts and state bankruptcy! Capitalism! Get hysterical about the imminent collapse of the global financial system! Twitter and facebook about that until you're twittered and facebooked out! I have to sell a book too after all. (weissgarnix.de 9, 6 Sept. 2010)

Extract 10

Question, did the Muslims invent slavery to compound interest? Are they to blame for the global economic crisis? Or the bankruptcy of banks, the necessity of saving banks with trillions, or the 150 billion present to Hyporeal? Did they cause the state debt, the Euro crisis, the crisis in the PIGS [Portugal, Italy, Greece, Spain] countries, state insolvency? Are they to blame for unemployment, or for the cuts in public spending? Did they allow the Treaty of Lisbon, enable the EU dictatorship and relinquish state sovereignty? [...] The hounding of Muslims which is going on worldwide is a manoeuvre to distract attention from the real problems. The anger of the people is supposed to be channelled against a scapegoat again, and away from the criminal villains. Away from the banksters, from the governments and corporations and away from the criminals who have been waging war in the Middle East for over 60 years. (allesschallundrauch.blogspot.com 1, 21 Sept. 2010)

These extracts illustrate the re-articulation of the primary line of difference in the Sarrazin case. They argue that it is not Muslims or those on welfare who should be seen as the problem, but 'debts and state bankruptcy' 'capitalism', 'collapse of the global financial

system', 'Treaty of Lisbon', 'banksters', etc. A demand is being made here, in various terms, to rethink/revolutionize the ways in which nation states and capitalism work together – as an oppressive regime – against the people.

To return to the minimal criteria of politics: extracts 5–9 fulfil all six. First, the comment in extract 8, which ends the post, that the author also has to sell a book, is not only humour but also part of the aim of *becoming hegemonic*. Blogs, books, re-posting other blog entries on one's own blog, explicitly telling readers to get worked up about something else, these are some of the strategies which indicate that the blogs aim to dislocate familiar discursive formations and to transform the contemporary social order. Second, the links among the blogs also suggest that this is not an ad hoc practice but a longer-term strategy. Third, organization, in terms of creating new chains of equivalences, is not only a matter of blog content, as this section has indicated, but is also enacted in the frequent links to blogs which bloggers endorse and the active non-linking to far-right-wing blogs. On occasion this is done explicitly, for example: 'Source: NPD-parliamentary group in the Sachsen State Parliament (*we'll leave the link out, since we have no interest that this portal be disseminated*)' (nachdenkseiten.de 32/22, 25 August 2010). Fourth, the collectivity of blogging is also flagged by the frequency of re-posting entries from other blogs. It is often claimed that this reposting practice is one factor which disqualifies bloggers from being 'real journalists'. It is, however, precisely the re-posting that foregrounds the blogs' collective dimension: in most cases, re-posting endorses and strengthens the message. Finally, the strong language and clear lines of conflict articulated illustrate the conflictuality and positionality of political blogging. Thus, these blogs seem to be aiming to build a new – more democratic in extract 5; more socially just in extracts 8 and 9 – hegemony, as Laclau and Mouffe have written:

If one is to build a chain of equivalences among democratic struggles, one needs to establish a frontier and define an adversary, but this is not enough. One also needs to know for what one is fighting, what kind of society one wants to establish.... What is at stake is the building of a new hegemony. (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: xix)

Overall, these blog posts shift the frontiers and define a (new) adversary. In each case, one chain of equivalences, Sarrazin—the (German) people—democracy, is broken. Sarrazin is pushed to the other side of the line of antagonism, and articulated together with various other adversaries, e.g. National Socialism, neoliberalism, capitalism. At the same time, this exclusion can only be accomplished by drawing chains of equivalences among what one is fighting for, for example, a society in which Social Democrats, the (working) people and Muslim immigrants join together in democratic struggle.

Conclusion

On a prime-time talk show on a major German television channel, Sarrazin defended his book by saying something along the lines of, yes, many people have criticized my conclusions but no-one has criticized my facts (stern TV, October 2010). As our analysis has shown, the contrary is the case. In the weeks preceding the interview, several media, including the blogs we cite above, had criticized his facts. If prime-time television is able to entirely ignore these critical media voices, to what extent can they be said to impact

on – or participate in creating – a democratic public sphere? In this article, we have suggested an alternative approach to theorizing the contemporary mediascape. Rather than seeing ‘alternative’ or ‘marginal’ political media as failing to live up to expectations and as irrelevant to (public) political debate, we see them as active participants in ‘minimal politics’ (Marchart, 2010). Democracy, in this sense, is not only about broadening participation in public debate, it is also about creating gaps in what can otherwise appear to be a hegemonic formation. Through the strategies – perhaps explicit, perhaps implicit – of rebutting, reflecting and re-articulating, the blogs writing about the Sarrazin case have torn tiny fissures in the mediascape, contesting the view circulating broadly in the news media that Muslim immigrants are the cause of Germany’s current social and economic problems. Where *rebutting* contests selected individual arguments or ‘facts’, *reflection* adopts an outsider position, observing the debate to see what can be learnt, and *re-articulation* shifts the antagonistic lines from within the configuration itself.

These strategies may, as Lefort has written, account for only a tiny rip, ‘but the traces of the rip will remain even after the veil has been woven anew’ (2008: 43). The constant ripping which occurs in the blogosphere, and perhaps also in other spaces of media production, means that ‘familiar rituals of the hegemonic formation’ are dislocated (Marchart, 2010: 324) and ensures that democracy – understood as practices of conflict and disagreement – is enacted on a daily basis. It means that, first, additional work is necessary to maintain the hegemonic formation: since it can only ever be partial and precarious, it requires constant work to stabilize. Second, as the reach of alternative or citizens’ media continues to spread, and an increasing number of people turn to multiple sources of news (PEW Research Center, 2008), the potential increases that any given social formation will be perceived as contingent, unstable and precarious (Macgilchrist, 2011: 16).

To avoid misunderstanding: this perspective does not celebrate the potential of blogs to become majoritarian or to directly influence official political decision-makers. It is the (implicit or explicit) aim of building a new hegemony that we have foregrounded; the radically democratic practices of contesting (rebutting, reflecting, re-articulating) what appears to be a current hegemonic formation. In a low-level way, the blogs accomplished the ‘art of the impossible’, by writing *as if they could* change ‘the very parameters of what is considered ‘possible’ in the existing constellation’ (Žižek, 2000: 237). Blogs contribute to the apparently mundane stabilization and destabilization of the existing constellation, and can thus be considered emphatically political. These quotidian practices are, in our opinion, what now require further scholarly attention. It seems plausible to us that just as the ‘banal nationalism’ of unwaved, unnoticed flags on city buildings primes populations for more ‘hot’ nationalist passion (Billig, 1995: 7), so the minimal politics of everyday political blogging perhaps primes readers for the more spectacular or revolutionary use of blogs and other online media. That, however, is a question for future research.

Notes

1. At the time of writing, the populist party pro Deutschland is using the catchphrase ‘Thilos Thesen’ (‘Thilo’s Arguments’) to promote its election campaign for the Berlin senate. This indicates that Sarrazin’s position remains not only well known but, at some levels of society, legitimate and desirable. At the same time, the 2011 massacre in Norway under the banner

of anti-Muslim/anti-immigration rhetoric will perhaps dislocate the (always only precarious) hegemony of this discourse.

2. We should note that Marchart's stated aim is to elaborate a post-foundational understanding of politics, and not to provide a catalogue of features, nor to conduct empirical research to define politics. His approach to post-foundational theory, and the importance of the difference between *politics (la politique)* and *the political (le politique)*, is outlined in Marchart (2007). The concept of *minimal politics* is described in detail in the extended German version of the book (Marchart, 2010).
3. To develop the notion of collectivity involves delving into psychoanalysis and the subject as lack, which goes beyond the scope of this article (see Marchart, 2010: 314–18; Žižek, 2000).
4. Our decision to analyse a corpus of blogs should not be taken to mean that only blogs contested Sarrazin's opinions or the media coverage of the case, nor that all blogs took a critical perspective. The right-wing blog politically incorrect (pi-news.net), for instance, took quite the opposite view.
5. We chose the 'most cited', rather than the 'most read' blogs, first, since the number of 'page impressions' leading to rankings of 'most read' can be more easily manipulated and, second, because the *Bild Zeitung* and *Spiegel*, which first publicized Sarrazin's book by pre-publishing selected sections, are also the 'most cited' in their media category ('German news media', Eck, 2010). In the analysis, both authors first individually analysed the sections of text concerning the Sarrazin case. From this initial individual analysis, we jointly identified broader strategies of contestation.
6. As with much qualitative analysis, the blog posts spill over the boundaries of the categories. We were surprised that only a very small number of posts did not overlap with any category. Since, however, our purpose in this article is to explore what can be 'seen' if one adopts the 'visualizing technologies' (Haraway, 1996: 253) made available by hegemony theory and the concept of minimal politics, the article focuses on the three categories to which most posts correspond.

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