

Cedric Essi, Heike Paul, and Boris Vormann, eds. "Common Grounds? American Democracy after Trump." Special issue, *Amerikastudien* 66, no. 1 (2021). (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter. <https://amst.winter-verlag.de/issue/AMST/2021/1>)

This special issue of *Amerikastudien*, a German-based American Studies quarterly, examines and problematizes aspects of American democracy in the Trump and post-Trump era. Principally, the authors in this issue seek to answer one underlying question: what problems plague contemporary American democracy and what, if anything, can be done to alleviate these problems? To frame this special issue's discussion, the editors present the notion of "common ground," the prominent idea that participants in a democracy must maintain some semblance of similarity for that democracy to function. In their introductory essay, the editors acknowledge that the notion of "common ground" has historically been used as a hegemonic tool to exclude and disenfranchise certain portions of the American population

(10). In other words, wealthy elites have intentionally constructed the “common ground” of American democracy on a narrow understanding of Americanness that is exclusively “White, able-bodied, cis-heteronormative, and patriarchal” (10). As such, the editors invite their authors to examine “common grounds?”—the modified and often pejorative term they use to describe the plural, shifting, and ultimately questionable basis on which American democracy operates. At its core, this special issue seeks to determine if the basic assumption of “common ground”—that commonalities are necessary for democracy to function—is legitimate, or if the invocation of supposed commonalities merely serves to further harmful American mythologies (11).

The special issue is split into two major sections: one that investigates democratic issues in America’s past and one that scrutinizes American democracy vis-à-vis contemporary Trumpian politics. Unlike normal issues of *Amerikastudien*, which contain several long-form peer-reviewed articles, this special issue contains over forty short-form essays that examine America’s political climate generally. These essays were written by a wide array of scholars from numerous disciplines and take many different forms, ranging from Melba Joyce Boyd’s poem discussing 1967 Detroit to Donald E. Pease’s reflections on the implications of the 2020 presidential election and Vanessa E. Thompson’s conversation with Cedric Essi (17, 143, and 241). The breadth of

perspectives presented in this special issue is undoubtedly one of its strengths. This issue's transnationality also serves it well, as non-American perspectives on Americanist topics can provide a much-needed fresh viewpoint for a discipline often rooted in American universities. Perhaps this special issue's greatest strength, however, is its conspicuous relevance to everyday life. Humanities scholars are consistently criticized for producing scholarship that does not directly address real-world issues. This critique cannot be levied against this special issue—its focus on contemporary political issues makes its contributions undeniably applicable to societal problems in need of solving. Given the large number of essays in this issue, it is impossible to discuss each contribution in this review's limited space. As such, this review examines themes present throughout many of the issue's articles and discusses several examples.

The first of these themes is a focus on race, particularly how American society excludes members of certain groups based on their racial identities. Siri Hustvedt, for example, contributes an analysis of Confederate statues in the United States, in which she demonstrates the links between the coded term "heritage"—often used to justify the existence of these statues—and "White glorification of an antebellum past founded on a racial hierarchy" (37). Following Hustvedt's essay, Michael Weinman argues that America's statue politics are inextricably linked with ideals of

American exceptionalism that prioritize White Americans (48). Laura Bieger's essay also focuses on racial issues, using the pertinent words of African American author Jesmyn Ward to illustrate the "structural conjunction of racial injustice and social inequality [in the United States]" (73). In an essay criticizing the "racial fantasies" of White American liberals, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva discounts a number of liberal American talking points, like the notion that America's racism is an exclusively Republican problem and that Trump's presidency exposed America's "real" racists—implying that those who did not support Trump do not contribute to America's racist social structures (57). As Bonilla-Silva writes, these conclusions obfuscate American society's racialized underpinnings, which, as many authors in this special issue demonstrate, fundamentally privilege White Americans over people of color. This is the primary topic that concerns many of this special issue's authors: the narrow "common ground" on which American democracy operates. Bonilla-Silva leaves us with an apt warning: he is afraid that in "post-Trump America, White liberals will exalt America as 'the exceptional nation' that returned, against all odds, to normality" (57). As Bonilla-Silva and other authors in this special issue demonstrate, Americanists must continue to interrogate the United States' racialized power structures, even as the country's political winds have shifted.

A second prominent theme present in many of this special issue's essays is whether academics should legitimize political opinions that are not rooted in reality by presenting these opinions as politically relevant. In other words, many of this issue's authors discuss controversial political topics and make explicit their belief that certain political perspectives should not be entertained. The main political perspective these authors discuss is that which led to the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol, an attack that the authors rightfully criticize. For example, Barry Shank writes that "[t]he maniacs who were planning to invade Congress and hang Mike Pence and Nancy Pelosi are beyond redemption... they are cancerous cells that must be surgically removed" (64). The prevalence of these political views has led some of this issue's authors to conclude that Americans with opposing perspectives represent two sides of a deeply divided country. Indeed, Craig Calhoun writes that "Americans do not just disagree; they live in different realities" (140). The implications of America's ideologically divided populous on notions of "common ground" are not lost on the authors. For example, Richard Sennett and Boris Vormann conclude that Americans need to come to the realization that "[Americans] aren't one country"—in other words, once Americans stop believing in the "fantasy of common ground," they can "hold people morally and legally responsible" (35). Indeed, Sennett writes that it is incumbent upon Americans to recognize the deep divides that have existed in the country since the times

of slavery and that Trump's presidency exposed. According to Sennett, Trump's presidency did not create America's political divides, but rather made those divides easily visible—a reality that must be accepted if the United States is to enact positive social change (36). Other authors present the implications of America's political divisions in a different light. Calhoun argues that for democracy to thrive in the United States, the country will need to undergo a social transformation that requires “working together” despite differing political perspectives (141). These are the camps into which many of this issue's authors are divided: those who believe America's political differences effectively destroy the myth of democratic “common ground” and those who believe America's political differences must be overcome to establish a “common ground” on which democracy can be fostered.

Ultimately, this special issue is intentionally unclear in its conclusions regarding the legitimacy of “common ground” as an underpinning ideal, instead electing to present a variety of perspectives on the topic. Something the issue does make clear, however, is its disdain for political views generally attributed to American conservatives. Shank's characterizations of the January 6, 2021, crowd as “maniacs” and “cancerous cells that need to be surgically removed” are relatively common descriptors used by many of this issue's authors to describe those who hold this political belief. These descriptions left me with a question: do

explicitly politically driven academic projects like this serve to bolster conservative arguments that academia is illegitimate because of its left-leaning perspectives? Ostensibly, academics discussing political topics are creating scholarship because they want to effect change, and oftentimes the scholarship they produce concludes that America's political conservatives should alter their beliefs and practices. Academic projects like this, though, that are explicitly left leaning in their approach, may serve to further ostracize academics from the conservative communities on which their scholarship focuses. By no means do I raise this issue with the intent to legitimize the political perspectives that allowed for the events of January 6th or continued racial inequities in American society. Instead, I present these ideas to illuminate a key tension in modern academia: how to portray political perspectives that are explicitly racist or unaligned with reality; that is, *harmful*. Should academics engage with perspectives that intentionally ignore fact? Furthermore, how do scholarly representations of political groups affect public opinion of academia generally? This *Amerikastudien* special issue leaves readers with these important questions, making it a valuable contribution to growing scholarship on America's contentious political environment.

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