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## From Culture Wars to Kulturkrieg?

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**M**USIC ARTISTS WHO SING IN SWISS GERMAN HARDLY ever make headlines outside their native territory—and not even there, if they choose a niche genre like reggae and if they are not under contract with a major label. That had been very much the reality for the singer and songwriter “Lauwarm,” who earns his living mainly as a carpenter. His YouTube channel usually counts less than five hundred subscribers—until one little summer scandal made nearly 30,000 people click on one of his music videos.

The song that suddenly grabbed so much attention is fittingly titled s’Problem, “the problem,” for it was an unexpected problem that drove the click numbers up: a July concert in Bern, Switzerland’s capital, was stopped because guests of the venue felt “uncomfortable” that a white band was playing reggae and one of its guitarists sported blond dreadlocks. Cultural appropriation was their verdict. In ironic contrast to his stage name which means “lukewarm,” Lauwarm became a hot topic, grabbing headlines in both Germany’s most prestigious weekly, Die ZEIT,

and its most notorious tabloid, BILD. It felt like an odd repeat, as months earlier the young German singer Ronja Maltzahn was uninvited from a concert hosted by the Fridays for Future movement because she, too, wears her hair in dreadlocks.

Just as the online anger on allegedly insensitive hairstyles subsided, another debate on cultural appropriation and racism dominated opinion pages: the cancellation of *Winnetou*.

Winne-*who*, you might wonder?

*Winnetou* is probably the only Native American celebrity figure who is utterly unknown in the United States. The brainchild of German author [Karl May](#) (1842–1912), the story of the “noble savage” and Chief of the Apaches has been devoured by generations of dominantly German-speaking readers, and a series of movies has an equally loyal following. In fact, the story gets re-discovered and re-interpreted regularly, be it as an over-the-top comedy and satire like the wildly successful movie *Der Schuh des Manitu* (2001) or as a prequel to May’s story in an upcoming children’s movie on the young Chief Winnetou.

One of Germany’s biggest children’s book and board game publishers, Ravensburger, announced the publication of new books and puzzles to accompany the movie release. But before a single copy reached the stores, Ravensburger announced that it would not sell the movie tie-ins after all—it claimed that it had recognized how culturally insensitive the planned publications would have been. And suddenly, journalists also dug up the two-year-old decision by ARD, Germany’s and the world’s largest public broadcaster network, to no longer show any Winnetou movies.

Yes, you would not learn anything about real Native Americans and their way of life, the history of oppression and discrimination they faced and still face by reading or watching Karl May movies. The author only visited the United States once—the success of his Winnetou books made him affluent enough to travel overseas. And yes, Karl May was anything but a moral role model; he was indeed a scoundrel who had served time in

prison and who was always on the lookout for an easy way to make an extra dime.

But in contrast to those who have now called for banning his work and adaptations thereof, most readers are and were well aware of the limitations of both work and author: the first thing I learned about Native Americans in Swiss primary (elementary) school was that I should not believe anything May wrote. The focus for readers and movie audiences was rather on the moral lessons in his books, such as the value of respect and tolerance, friendship, and loyalty.

Both the debate on *Winnetou* and on dreadlocks perfectly mirror controversies in the United States—yet the mirror seems distorted: the verbatim and unquestioned introduction of terms such as “cultural appropriation,” “woke,” and “cancel culture” is problematic enough given the dramatically different histories and current demographics of German-speaking countries. But it is not only the terms as such that are adopted, but also the antagonistic style associated with them in the US context: problems regarding cultural appropriation, racism, and/or colonialism are to be solved by pressure, cancellation, and the negation of any true dialogue or room for compromise.

At the same time, right-wing commentators and activists may not (yet) ask for “book bans” as they successfully do in the United States, but they have likewise adopted a deafeningly shrill tone when it comes to addressing the concerns of liberal progressives. True dialogue would, however, require listening, that is, *active* listening and paying attention to what is said. Case in point: [a media analysis portal](#) has found that the *Winnetou* debate overstated the influence of so-called woke activists and instead followed a simplistic narrative.

A polarized and uncompromising debate fought on the basis of contextually inadequate concepts—it is tempting to call this an Americanization of cultural and political debates.

Swiss and German warriors not only point the finger at each other in their culture wars—they also point it at a third party: the United States

The same can be observed with the arguably most contentious culture war issue right now, namely abortion. Switzerland is notoriously slow in social liberalization processes—after all, Swiss women only received the right to vote in 1971. Six years later, and thus four years after *Roe v. Wade*, Swiss voters decided against liberalizing abortion, even though the suggested policy was quite strict in comparison to *Roe*: for the first twelve weeks of a pregnancy, women would have had unconditional access to an abortion; after the first trimester, medical reasons would have been required. In 2002, nearly thirty years later, social and moral attitudes had changed: More than 72% of Swiss voters favored the so-called *Fristenlösung*.

Challenges to said law have been futile—there is a robust consensus that abortion should remain legal and accessible under these conditions. And yet, *Dobbs* created a moment of panic: not only did many Austrian, German, and Swiss media outlets misrepresent the decision so that many people believed that abortion had become completely illegal in the entire United States. Some also suggested that the decision might affect Europe. The specter of a *Kulturkampf* in lockstep with American culture wars?

Needless to say, such a development is highly unlikely. While culture war issues are indeed pressing concerns in the United States, European onlookers are mainly one thing: voyeurs, and often self-righteous ones at that. In this vein, *Dobbs* has served some European politicians and media commentators as an opportunity to display their own righteousness with little regard for the fact that their countries' regulations would be irreconcilable with *Roe*.

German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock, for instance, declared her solidarity with US women by taking to the streets. Minister Baerbock stressed that abortion was part of a women's right to control her own body. Yet in Germany, the legal situation is closer to what Mississippi

aimed for originally than the reality of *Roe*—and the Minister herself only took a stance against the prohibition of abortion ads rather than the abortion restrictions as such.

Controversies on culture war issues are generally dominated by an accusatory logic. But in contrast to US debates, Swiss and German warriors not only point the finger at each other—they also point it at a third party: the United States. On the one hand, US terminology feeds the vocabulary and theories underlying these controversies. On the other hand, the US is given as either a deterring or inspiring example, whatever serves the narrative. Neither is conducive to a constructive debate—and all of it is a distraction from our actual problems and our own flaws.

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