

Call for Papers**“Popular Culture and Democracy: Opportunities, Challenges, and the Way Forward”**

PhD and Early Career Conference

University of Freiburg, Germany | October 24-26, 2024

Deadline for Submission: July 31, 2024

In 2024, nearly half of the world’s population heads to the polls. State elections in the United States, the United Kingdom, India, and numerous other countries will have wide-reaching global consequences. In many places, these elections take place within a landscape in which democracy is threatened, raising questions about the perception and meaning of democratic values against divided voices and worldviews. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson call for a return to democracy as a political term,ⁱ stressing the importance of analyzing what democracy means and how institutions relate to it. Popular culture facilitates interactions with and representations of democracy through its broad accessibility and mainstream appeal. It therefore offers a plethora of venues to explore how individuals, audiences, industries, and institutions engage with democracy through such diverse objects and mediums as social media platforms, movies, video games, or podcasts. Thus, against the backdrop of the current democratic and anti-democratic developments in the English-speaking world, these interactions present both opportunities and challenges which offer grounds for important academic exploration.

Products and mediums of popular culture influence and are shaped by the discussions surrounding democracy. Popular culture enables a “democracy of enjoyment”, as John Storey explains.ⁱⁱ It not only appeals to the masses but is also characterized by immediacy which allows strong connections with audiences. In addition, it facilitates widespread distribution and participation in democratic discourses. Popular culture both struggles with institutions and individuals pushing for certain ideals while also encompassing subversive and “political potential”.ⁱⁱⁱ Whether it be fictional and non-fictional politicians featured in television shows, pop songs perpetuating political ideologies, activists using online spaces to critique democratic injustices, or sports stars taking a political stance – popular culture both impacts and is influenced by how its consumers think about and interreact with democracy and democratic practices. These intersections of popular culture and democracy can have lasting negative consequences as well as resounding positive effects. As popular culture engages the civic imagination and fosters a continuous exchange of ideas, representations, and power, it extends its influence on diverse critical areas such as climate change activism, labor rights, the ‘culture war’, and identity politics.

The conference “Popular Culture and Democracy”, organized by PhD candidates in British and North American literary and cultural studies at the University of Freiburg, Germany, warmly welcomes interdisciplinary approaches and contributions on topics targeting the connection of popular culture and democracy in the English-speaking world. Papers can include topics on specific popular culture products and mediums, or a particular approach to the topic from postcolonial studies, gender studies, queer studies, political theory and other perspectives.

We invite proposals for individual papers, on topics that can include, but are not limited to:

- The intersection of populism and popular culture
- Popular culture, conspiracy theories, and anti-democratic sentiments
- Heroes / villains in popular culture and their relationship with democratic structures
- Post- & De- colonial approaches and representations of BIPOC rights in popular culture
- Representations of Indigeneity and Indigenous sovereignty in popular culture
- Images of (in)justice, political activism, and resistance in popular culture
- (Anti-)democratic ideologies in, for example, popular music or video games
- Representations of legal frameworks within the popular culture landscape
- Social media platforms and democracy
- Utopian / dystopian projections of democracy’s future in popular culture
- Popular culture’s representation of natural disasters or pandemics, and their underlying political agenda
- Genre-specific representations of democracy, e.g. in horror, comedy, or science fiction

Please send proposals of no more than 300 words and a 50-word biography to popdem2024@frias.uni-freiburg.de by **July 31, 2024**. Speakers will be notified in the first half of August. For up-to-date information, please check [the conference website](#).

The conference will be held in person. We offer a travel bursary and accommodation to all confirmed speakers. Early career researchers associated with international universities are especially encouraged to submit a proposal.

Organizational team: Kübra Aksay, Sophie-Constanze Bantle, Ece Ergin, Klara Machata, Kelly Schmidt, Kristina Seefeldt (English Department, University of Freiburg)

ⁱ Castronovo, Russ, and Dana D. Nelson. “Introduction: Materializing Democracy and Other Political Fantasies.” *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, Duke University Press, 2002, p. 3.

ⁱⁱ Storey, John. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. 8th ed., Routledge, 2018, p. 273.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fiske, John. *Reading the Popular*. Routledge, 2006, p. x.