

"I was honestly just speaking as Robert"

New Forms of Sentimental Leadership in Contemporary German Politics

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Introduction

Only a few years ago, it was common in the social science debate on politics to assume a high degree of dispassion in modern, bureaucratically organized democracies (the classic reference until today is Weber 1978). The habitus of the modern politician was considered to be primarily characterized by emotional control, perseverance, the ability to role-play, and a rather impersonal style of self-presentation. Max Weber's phrase from his lecture "Politics as a Vocation" according to which politics is "a strong and slow boring of hard boards" (Weber 1970, 128) has become famous: Passion, a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion are, in Weber's view, the three decisive qualities for every politician, whereby passion is explicitly defined by him as "passion in the sense of matter-of-factness" (Weber 1970, 115).

This model of politics based on matter-of-factness is currently coming under pressure from various directions—not only in the form of vulgar populist hostility but also from the media, the public, and even academia. The ideal of political office characterized by a detachment from one's own person, has recently been confronted with broad criticism in representative democracies, lamenting the lack of passion on the part of political personnel and the lack of responsiveness on the part of governments (Mair). Political actors are increasingly being accused of acting too factually and being too emotionally aloof. In the course of the so-called *affective turn* in the cultural and social sciences, not only has the scholarly marginalization of political emotions been lamented, but the need for affective political narratives has also been repeatedly stated (e.g. Mouffe).

This article deals with the tension between passion and dispassion in today's politics, taking Germany as an example. Politics as a profession, with its demands for professionalism and detachment on the one hand, increasingly collides with expectations of intimacy and attentiveness on the other. The display of sentiments by political staff that can currently be observed in various places and in various forms seems to be related to this development. The focus is therefore not on specific individual feelings of political personnel but on the display of feelings in public, and subsequently the politicians' public image. In what follows, the question will be addressed what problems the use of sentimentality in political communication can solve and what opportunities and risks are associated with it. A few selected case studies from contemporary German politics are used to shed light on the relationship between sentimentality and political communication in order to ask about the causes of a new political tone that can currently be observed.

A New Form of Political Passion

From Matter-of-Factness to Exposing One's Own Inner Struggles

The following remarks concentrate on examples from German politics and focus exclusively on members of the former German governing parties. This restriction is by no means accidental. When German voters elected a new federal government in September 2021, the newly formed so-called "traffic light" coalition of (red) social democrats, (yellow) liberals and the Greens enthusiastically proclaimed itself a coalition for progress. This was clearly not intended to refer only to the level of political content; rather, it was also associated with the hope for a different style of politics, a different working atmosphere, and a new form of political address. The intent was clearly to strike a political tone unmistakably different from that of the previous governments and, above all, from that which can currently be heard from the populist parties' camp. Whether these hopes have been fulfilled in hindsight is another matter, but said coalition had started with the expressed aim of working together in a more progressive and modern way. Its members wanted to listen carefully to each other; they wanted to do without long nighttime meetings that make family life impossible; and it wanted to present itself to the public in a different way.

A somewhat marginal, yet particularly vivid example might illustrate this desire for a different political tone and a different manner. In April 2023, the weekly *ZEIT Magazine* asked some celebrities to take a selfie. Alongside actors,

musicians, and athletes, one of them was Lars Klingbeil, chairman of the German Social Democratic Party. He looks a little tired in the photo (figure 1), wearing a grey sweatshirt and a green parka. The image creates the impression of maximum nonchalance but is of course highly staged. However, the point here is not to accuse him of staging but to ask about the intention behind the staging and what it draws our attention to. Here, Lars Klingbeil's selfie reveals an interesting shift that tells us a lot about the political moment. It is also worth reading the short text that Klingbeil added to his selfie: "When I look in the mirror, I see all the worries we have had as a country over the past year. I see the responsibility that politics bears and the billions that we have set in motion to keep people's lives affordable. When I look into the mirror, I can see that the year has left its mark."

Figure 1: Selfie of Lars Klingbeil



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Klingbeil not only presents himself to us as a human being, he also provides us—which, of course, is due to the magazine's assignment, as this is no ordinary Instagram post—with a commentary on his own selfie. In this statement, there is a remarkable interweaving of the efforts of the political community

and the suffering of the politician in power. Klingbeil lets us know that he can read the efforts and worries of the whole country in his face. Politics obviously leaves its mark, and you do not even need professional photographers to document it. Today, politicians themselves reveal their own feelings, their fears, their vulnerability, and fatigue to the public.

This brief example is intended to illustrate what will be discussed below: More and more often, we encounter politicians as emotional and sensible individuals—and they, in return, exhibit this sensibility as an essential part of their politics. There are currently numerous examples of politicians admitting to being overworked, complaining about pressure, emphasizing self-doubt, expressing their own vulnerability, or openly admitting mistakes. This certainly is related to the change of expectations in politics and in politicians, and it has to do with changes in the media and political landscape. Whether in very personal interviews in podcasts, in long documentaries, or in politicians' self-portrayals on their social media channels, we get unvarnished insights into the political backstage and the dark side of everyday political life. This not only reflects *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas), this development also requires us to rethink classic concepts of political theory such as office, power, and representation.

Robert Habeck: A Symptomatic Figure of Sentimental Leadership in German Politics

There is probably no other figure in contemporary German politics who demonstrates this effort to find a new tonality and a new form of self-presentation as clearly as the former Green German Vice-Chancellor and Federal Minister for Economic Affairs and Climate Action Robert Habeck (Müller/Séville 2022a). Prior to his political career, he had studied philosophy and literature, obtained a doctorate in philosophy, and worked as a writer and translator. Like no German politician before him, Habeck openly describes in both his books and his public appearances his personal struggle to find the right words and the right tone. Habeck is very aware of the performative power of speech—it is no co-incidence that he also authored a book about language use in democratic societies, which contains an introduction to political speech act theory (Habeck 2018). He very consciously employs this knowledge in his talks and writings, always trying to combine the very big with the very small, the political with the personal, an exaggeratedly statesmanlike tone

with a certain brashness. One particular formulation describing his politics is revealing in this context: In his book *Von hier an anders* (*Different from here on*), he describes his political style as "self-critical fighting" (Habeck 2021, 64). This formulation is also notable in that it combines opposites that are usually kept apart in politics and political theory. On the one hand, there is the idea of politics as a fight, the Schmittian decisionist model, so to speak; on the other hand, there is an emphasis on communication and on constant self-criticism, the Habermasian deliberative model.

Habeck reconciles these opposites, which becomes the trademark of a new model of sentimental leadership. He presents himself as a politician caught up in permanent self-reflection and he uses precisely this reflexivity in the political battle. In doing so, instead of hiding his own insecurities, his doubts, and his inner struggles with respect to certain positions, he reveals all of this and proves himself to be a "homo sentimental" (Illouz 11–92). In late modernity, reflecting on one's own sentiments not only seems to have become a general requirement for the individual, but also a decisive political virtue. That these feelings inevitably expose the person behind the office holder is beyond question for Habeck. He is aware of the danger of showing himself openly and thereby making himself vulnerable, and yet he deliberately tries to undermine the strict separation of a politician in the public eye on the one hand and a real person on the other. His public appearance as a "real human being" is not due to any private preference but rather arises from a "political analysis," as he himself emphasizes in an interview:

And I dare to go further—and this is not a private decision because I like to be such a blabbermouth, but a political analysis—further than many other colleagues, because I believe that this admission of understanding how politics works and how people in politics are doing is very, very important, so that people are seen, even in their limitations, but not in their nakedness, so to speak.¹

Such a new form of self-aware, self-critical, yes, *sentimental* leadership, as Habeck has in mind, prefers not to hide its own insecurities and struggles. Instead, it even consciously uses them in order to reveal its own constraints and dilemmas and thus to convince others. In this light, open self-criticism

1 Robert Habeck in the podcast *Alles gesagt?*, April 23, 2018 (at minute 1:10:27, translation J. M.).

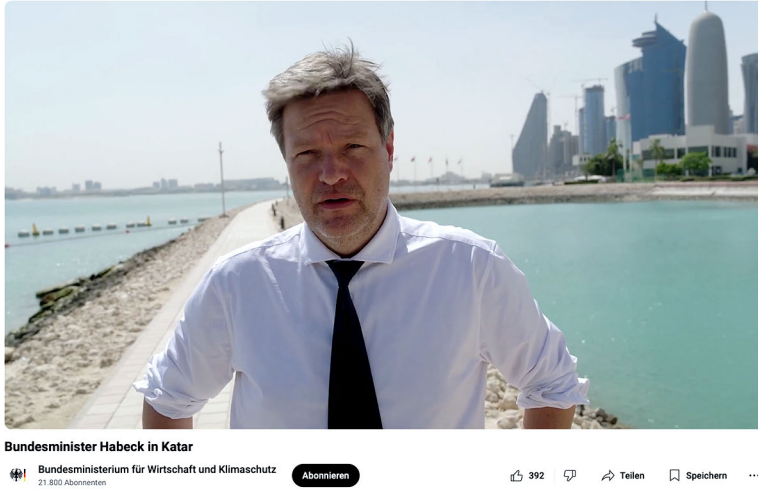
becomes an effective instrument of political persuasion that is associated with specific *validity claims*. This can be illustrated by the following video message. In March 2022, Habeck traveled to Qatar to negotiate the supply of liquid gas to Germany with the emir of Qatar in the wake of the beginning of the war in Ukraine. On the Instagram account of his ministry, Habeck shared a selfie video in which he tried to explain this step that was viewed very critically by the German public. In the video (figure 2), Habeck is wearing a white shirt with sleeves rolled up and a black tie and is standing in the sunshine against a blue sky and the skyline of Doha. Already the first sentence of the video is remarkable: “I am now here in Doha, on the second day of a trip that is somehow totally strange. People are dying in Ukraine, and here—you can see for yourselves—that’s what the skyline’s like. But it is the Ukraine crisis that has brought me here.”

Habeck addresses us directly and uses the informal second-person form of address “Du”, which in Germany is unusual in politics, to tell us where he is speaking from and what he has done that day. At the same time, however, he provides his own commentary on his video. Habeck knows only too well about the political power of images. He also knows that the images of sunshine and the sea in the background may seem “strange” in times of war and immediately addresses that strangeness himself. In the course of the video, Habeck has to visibly strain himself both physically and rhetorically, almost as if he were speaking with two bodies and two voices. On the one hand, the current minister Dr. Habeck who has to concern himself with the energy security of his country; on the other hand, the Green politician Robert from Flensburg who is aware of the concerns and sensitivities of his party and its milieu in matters of environmental protection and human rights.

Habeck thus maneuvers discursively between references to the constraints and necessities created by the war in Ukraine and his own self-imposed standards for his actions. It is notable that, even in times of war, Habeck offers a critical commentary on his politics. In reference to Ernst Kantorowicz, Habeck deliberately exposes the two bodies of the minister: the acting and powerful *body politic* and the experiencing and suffering *body natural* (Kantorowicz). It is precisely this role conflict between the two bodies that we, as viewers, are supposed to perceive (Schönberger). It is an open question as to how long the reference to self-criticism and self-reflexivity can serve as a basis for one’s political actions. What is certain, however, is that Habeck has tried out a new form of political address that does not ignore political dilemmas or resolve them in

terms of power politics but rather openly communicates them to voters as a challenge and makes precisely this the core of his brand.

Figure 2: Robert Habeck via the YouTube channel of the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7zvJ3oaQnI>

Yet, this is not only about Robert Habeck as a person. Rather, the analysis of his communication indicates a certain *political form of talk*² that reflects developments within current politics, of which Habeck represents just one particularly striking case among many others. These developments need to be observed very closely if we want to understand the challenges within current politics: When political actors today increasingly attempt to communicate as a “whole person,” which means that they make the simultaneity of the two bodies visible, this goes beyond the diagnoses of a personalization of politics (Karvonen; Adam/Maier; Stanyer). Here, the political is articulated anew, be it through the disclosure of one’s own doubts, constraints, and worries, be it through the positive use of one’s own vulnerability, or through the conscious

2 Cf. Astrid Séville and Julian Müller’s 2024 book *Politische Redeweisen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck), the title of which refers to Erving Goffman’s *Forms of Talk*.

and sometimes strategic use of authenticity³ (Luebke). There are, of course, many reasons for the emergence of such a sentimental leadership, some of which will be discussed in more detail below. For the specific case of Germany, it must at least be mentioned that there has been an unmistakable fatigue both with the very masculine and heroic appearance as, for example, practiced by former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, but also with the bureaucratic and post-heroic appearance of Angela Merkel. Robert Habeck's sentimental leadership, however, is neither heroic nor postheroic (Bröckling). To a certain extent it eludes this distinction. It would be more accurate to speak of a *post-postheroic* style of leadership that combines strength and perseverance with self-criticism and sentimentality.

New Media of Sentimental Leadership

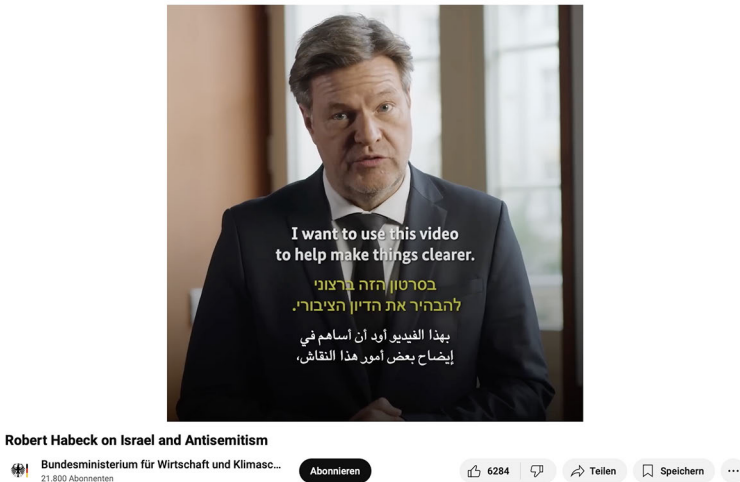
It is impossible to talk about the change in political communication and new forms of sentimental leadership without also mentioning the media involved in this change. That the documents discussed so far in this article were a selfie and a video message is no coincidence. As much as the selfie may resemble the classic professionally taken photograph of a politician, it also markedly differs from it; just as the video message, which we, until recently, have only known as a format from Christmas or New Year's speeches, differs from a televised political speech on a political stage (Klein). As marginal as these differences may seem at first glance, they are crucial to understanding the challenges to political communication under current media conditions and to analyzing what the characteristics of sentimental leadership are.

Habeck's video message from Doha is by no means the only one of its kind. He uses this format like no other German politician before him, and he uses it for his own agenda. Shortly after the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, he recorded a video (figure 3) in which he expressed his condolences to the families of the victims and his solidarity with Israel.⁴

3 For a comprehensive overview of changes in emotional culture in late modernity, the emergence of the "emotional self" (Lupton) and the associated revaluation of authenticity, see Pritz.

4 Via the channel of the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdZvkkpJaVI>

Figure 3: Robert Habeck via the YouTube channel of the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdZvkkpJaVI>

With his detailed and very specific statement, he got ahead of both Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock. In this video, Habeck speaks directly to the camera and consequently also directly to us as viewers. Since the video was recorded in an official room and also distributed via his ministry's channel, provided with English, Hebrew, and Arabic subtitles, we must assume that a ruling minister is speaking to us here—Habeck is wearing a suit and tie. What is even more interesting is Habeck's own assessment, which he gave when asked about this video in an interview: "And I didn't feel like a Green at all when I recorded these videos, I was honestly just speaking as Robert."⁵

This is in no way intended as an exposure or mockery. Habeck's statement is highly interesting in that it actually reveals how difficult it is today to decide who is actually speaking to us. Is the tired face that Lars Klingbeil is pho-

5 Habeck in the podcast *Machtwechsel*, May 16, 2024 (at minute 47:18): "Ich hab mich auch gar nicht als Grüner gefühlt, als ich da diese Videos aufgenommen habe, sondern nur eigentlich ehrlicherweise als Robert gesprochen" (<https://podtail.com/podcast/machtwechsel/habecks-sondervermogen-das-war-eine-spontane-situa/>).

tographing for us in his private clothes with his mobile phone his own or that of the Social Democratic Party leader? Is the deep sadness that Robert Habeck very credibly assures us of in his video message his own or that of an elected and governing minister? These questions are anything but trivial—and in times of mobile phones, Instagram accounts, Netflix documentaries, and podcasts, they arise with such urgency that it is currently impossible to avoid looking at these types of medial representations if we want to understand contemporary politics. That is what the following will be about.

New Television Formats and the Focus on the Self-Expressive Face

With regard to the questions addressed here, it is worth mentioning recent television formats in which a slightly different way of presenting politics and a different portrayal of political figures has been explored. For example, the journalist Markus Feldenkirchen, who became known for a long and detailed reportage on the German politician Martin Schulz,⁶ has been presenting the television program *Konfrontation* for some time now. In it, Feldenkirchen sits at a table with a politician—among them Armin Laschet, former CDU candidate for chancellor, Karl Lauterbach, former Federal Minister of Health, Sahra Wagenknecht, former left-wing politician and founder of her own party, and

6 Feldenkirchen wrote a feature on the 2017 German election campaign of SPD politician Martin Schulz, in which we can observe the politician again and again in moments of despair and weakness. This journalistic project was criticized from various directions. Feldenkirchen justified himself in response. His feature was never about voyeurism or exposure but about a different portrayal of politics that was intended to paint a more vivid picture of real people in politics and thus generate empathy among voters. Feldenkirchen's statement in his defense is quite remarkable: "The humanness of a politician seems to be one of those things. There are 'faults' that citizens can live with: Edgy, cheeky, uncomfortable, stubborn, a bit eccentric, perhaps even rude, politicians are allowed, indeed expected, to be all of these things, and authenticity even has a positive effect on them. But things get tricky when signs of weakness become apparent. It is true that we should rightly expect top politicians to be strong in their decision-making. But where does it say that politicians have no doubts and that these must never become visible? Anyone who expects this is forcing politicians to hide part of their personality. Now that this experiment [the coverage of Martin Schulz; JM] is over, I still believe that politics would benefit from a greater degree of transparency, especially in times of growing contempt for politicians and democracy. However, I have also come to realize this in the months I have been with them: Allowing transparency requires as much courage as strength." (Feldenkirchen 305)

Robert Habeck. Together with Feldenkirchen, all of these guests watched a documentary about themselves. In contrast to the usual talk shows, the invited politicians are not confronted with hard questions but with television images of themselves. As viewers, we are able to observe them in dealing with their own media image. Similar to the many reaction videos on the internet, the way they react becomes the decisive political message and "facework" becomes the necessary tool for it (Goffman 1955; cf. Dekavalla).

One can clearly observe different tempers and also different styles of dealing with the politicians' medial self in this program, however, this is about much more than just a matter of style. From media theory's perspective, the format of this show is interesting because it takes a certain form of representation of politics to extremes. We encounter politicians as experiencing subjects, and the self-expressive face becomes crucial information and the most important instrument of sentimental leadership. *The Presentation of Self* (Goffman 1959) increasingly includes a presentation of the reacting self. It cannot be overstated that in times of ever faster media observation, commentary, and evaluation, the control of one's own reactions is obviously becoming a decisive element of political *phronesis*.

In one of the most interesting passages in his work, German sociologist Niklas Luhmann pointed out that one must always distinguish very precisely between experience (*Erleben*) and action (*Handeln*). In his view, modern society is characterized by the fact that the attribution of experience and action typically takes place differently in different social spheres (Luhmann 83–84). In the case of politics, the attribution is usually exclusively to action. The action of one person is supposed to trigger the action of another, which usually happens with the help of political power. Whether the current political situation is still well described by this is an open question. Of course, action has to be taken in politics, decisions have to be made, and yet, it is striking how often one's own experience is incorporated into the communication of political decisions as a new strategy of political persuasion. Politicians today are by no means only people who hold the reins of power. More and more frequently, we encounter them as experiencing subjects—and they present this experience as an essential part of their politics.

This shift can also be seen in other TV formats. One particularly impressive example of this is a documentary about Kevin Kühnert—*Kevin Kühnert und die SPD*—that was broadcast on German television. In it, the young and aspiring politician of the German Social Democrats was accompanied by a camera over a long period of time, from the rebellious chairman of the party's youth or-

ganization, who stirred up trouble against established politicians, to the 2021 federal elections, when he took the important office of Secretary General. This documentary is not only interesting because it provides unusual and unvarnished insights into the everyday life of political Berlin, into the dreary offices and corridors of the party headquarters, and thus also capturing the dullness of politics, but above all because we can watch a politician constantly reacting in it—be it while being advised, listening to the speeches of others, or nervously awaiting election results. The self-expressive face in close-up, to which we are accustomed from sports, cinema, religion, or even pornography, is an integral part of this documentary. It adds something decisive to the action which results in a strange detachment of the face from the body and from the action (Deleuze/Guattari 176). As viewers, we are challenged to observe it as a separate screen with its own plot. For the viewers, this inevitably leads to a shift from understanding political messages to empathizing with the political protagonist. This is a development that can hardly be overestimated and which is by no means only visible in the exhibition of the self-expressive face. The following section will therefore focus on the spoken word and the immediacy of the voice, which has gained importance in the last few years due to the rise of podcasts.

Podcasts and the Suggestion of Immediacy

Podcasts as an information and entertainment medium have become significantly more important in the last few years and have spread accordingly. In Germany, 71% of the population over the age of 14 regularly listened to podcasts in 2023 (OAM 2023). It is therefore no longer a niche offering to be neglected but an essential part of the current media infrastructure (Spinelli/Dann). While research has already claimed that traditional radio has not only initiated a democratization but also an intimization of public speaking (Goodman 72), this development has intensified even further in recent years. Completely new forms of consumption can also be observed. In particular, the feeling of being isolated from the outside world induced by headphones with simultaneous freedom of movement and the strong focus on the voice has resulted in a reception that is perceived as particularly intimate and private (Lieberman/Schroeder/Amir; Rae). This gives listeners the feeling of being in an “intimate soundscape of their own choosing” (Lacey, 120).

These preliminary remarks are important because this perceived intimacy does indeed have an influence on political content and certainly has a new qual-

ity in the context of political information (MacDougal). The two podcasts *Alles gesagt?* and *Hotel Matze* are of particular relevance. Both formats are among the 25 most listened to podcasts in Germany in 2024 and are characterized by the fact that they cultivate a very personal way of speaking, for which the term "deep talk" has not coincidentally become established. In the *Hotel Matze* format, for example, all guests—even former Chancellor Olaf Scholz—are programmatically on a first-name basis and involved in a conversation situation that is reminiscent of either a therapeutic or a friendly conversation. In the *Alles gesagt?* format, on the other hand, food and drink are programmatically served during the conversation, which is deliberately intended to create an informal atmosphere. In addition, there are no length limits for the recordings; the end is determined by the guest's own choice of final words. This means that individual programs can be found in which politicians talk for a very long time—sometimes even for over six hours—about personal and biographical matters in addition to questions about realpolitik. We learn about our political personnel's favorite music, their favorite books, everyday family life, and last holiday.

Even the questions that politicians are confronted with in these podcast formats and to which they have to respond indicate changing expectations of political professionalism: "Do you allow yourself to do things like come home and moan?" (to Robert Habeck), "Who takes care of you?" (to former Federal Minister for Family Affairs Franziska Giffey), "What makes you happy?" (to former Minister of Health Jens Spahn) "Who was your first great love? (to the leader of the Green Party Ricarda Lang), "Why are you doing this to yourself?" (to Olaf Scholz). The special setting of podcasts makes it difficult for guests in these formats to escape such personal expectations and almost forces them to let their own person come to the fore. And it is precisely the reflection of one's own personal feelings that is almost expected in these special settings.

Moreover, politicians are by no means only appearing as guests in these formats. More and more politicians are now hosting their own formats: Angela Merkel, for example, launched the podcast *Angela Merkel – Die Kanzlerin direkt* during her time in office, former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder launched the podcast *Die Agenda* long after his time in office, and Barack Obama recorded eight episodes of the *Renegades: Born in the USA* format together with Bruce Springsteen after his presidency. From the former German government, the above-mentioned Lars Klingbeil and Kevin Kühnert with their joint podcast (*Die K-Frage*) and the former Federal Minister of Finance Christian Lindner (*CL+*) should be mentioned.

The latter deserves special attention, as it features a then-serving minister leading a format in which he does not provide answers, as we are used to, but instead asks questions and responds to the answers of others (Müller/Séville 2022b). In his podcast, Lindner does not appear as an all-knowing expert but as an approachable questioner who is interested in an exchange with his guests from different areas of society. The conversation is intimate and the tone is personal and calm. Lindner follows up, asks attentive questions, and remembers what has been said. The very first question Lindner asked in the very first episode of his podcast was not by chance: “How do you see Germany? What do you feel when you tap into German society?”

It is precisely in such formats that new forms of sentimental leadership are emerging. Here, a new way of political communication is clearly being experimented with, in which a federal minister suddenly appears as a questioner and as a responder, interested in the answers of others. A willingness to react empathetically suddenly becomes more important than the ability to act—and is exhibited as such. There is no question that this is all well-calculated and staged accordingly. For our purposes, however, it is important to see what the staging draws attention to. And here, politicians increasingly appear as figures who are to a certain extent exposed to world events themselves, who have questions for others, who listen attentively, and who are sometimes at a loss themselves.

Show Your Wounds: Social Media Apostasy as a Political Statement

This shift from political action to political experience can only be hinted at here and needs to be investigated further. However, it is quite apparent that politicians are currently revealing their own felt experience more and more frequently and are making it an issue in the first place. Nothing illustrates this more clearly than the numerous complaints about the loss of respect for political staff and about the sharp deterioration of manners, particularly in social media. A whole series of well-known politicians have therefore recently decided to turn their backs on social media. One of the first among these was Robert Habeck, who became a Twitter defector with a long statement on his own homepage with great publicity and aplomb. Habeck was devastated to discover changes in his behavior and communication that—as he felt—urgently needed to be addressed. Not only had Twitter left him increasingly disoriented and unfocused. What is more, it had awakened base instincts in him that fundamentally contradicted his political self-image. The medium’s technical nature encourages a certain “loudness” and a form of communicative

escalation that even if one would like to avoid it, is extremely difficult to escape in practical use:

Twitter, like no other digital medium, is so aggressive and in no other medium is there so much hatred, malice, and agitation. Apparently, Twitter triggers something in me: to be more aggressive, louder, more polemical and more pointed—and all this at a speed that makes it hard to leave room for reflection. Apparently, I am not immune to it. Yet politically, this is not my thing, more like the exact opposite. (Habeck 2019, translation J. M.)

Habeck was not the only one to withdraw from Twitter—other politicians such as Kevin Kühnert, Jens Spahn, or Saskia Esken or media professionals such as Ulf Poschardt or Jakob Augstein followed him shortly afterwards.⁷ All of the publicly stated explanations given for this step emphasized the deformations caused by the medium. Obviously, there has been criticism of the media from politicians before; however, the current stories of retreat from social media take on a decidedly different form. They are formulated less generally and instead highlight the negative transformations of the users themselves caused by the medium. Ferocity and harshness are not abstract phenomena but rather very concrete changes in behavior the politicians were shocked to notice in themselves. These public statements are especially interesting because they are not primarily a criticism of the circumstances but a publicly presented form of self-criticism. In my opinion, this clearly demonstrates a new form of sentimental leadership.

Everyday political work is no longer portrayed as rosy and politicians have long since ceased to present themselves mainly as energetic and self-confident but rather as vulnerable. Anyone who takes careful note of the many podcasts, documentaries, and self-reports will encounter actors who no longer conceal exhausting working conditions and their personal struggles. When Kevin Kühnert describes his work schedule to the host of the *Hotel Matze* podcast and talks about short nights, being tired and bullied by schedules, he feels the need to clarify that these are all self-imposed burdens difficult to reconcile with buzz-words such as self-care or work-life balance:

7 Not all of them kept up their Twitter withdrawal and are now active again. This even includes Robert Habeck, who announced his return to Twitter, now X, in November 2024 with the statement "back for good" and shared a video that demonstrates sentimental leadership in an almost exaggerated way.

This is, of course, a completely prehistoric and archaic idea of how to deal with human resources. Of course, this also ensures that a certain type of person who is more careful with himself or herself may not even consider getting involved in politics at this level; there are also those, however, who go into politics with noble aspirations and want to be very careful with themselves and then at some point change their nature and say, okay, I can now choose between either taking on more political responsibility and treating myself differently, more ruthlessly, or maintaining my standards towards myself, my family, and my friends but then also having less political influence because there is a glass ceiling that I simply can't get through. So, when it gets to the level of ministerial posts or similar positions, then we are talking about this kind of absorption of everything, yes, this culture of official travel in the international arena at the moment, where you fly through the night and then you are at the state reception at eight in the morning, and then you go back the next night. This is incompatible with notions of self-care. [Host: But that is total shit!] Yes, it is.⁸

In the course of the conversation, Kühnert describes political work as an activity that absorbs everything private that, at a certain level, one cannot escape. Kühnert, but also other politicians, paint a picture of *politics as a tough vocation*. All of this should not be too easily dismissed as whining and lamentation;⁹ rather, it is important and an urgent task for the social sciences to scrutinize the causes and perhaps also the necessity of such public appearances.

Conclusion

The display of one's sentiments, to sum up, is connected to a central tension in contemporary politics. Political actors themselves strive to live up to the expectations of being both factual, distanced professionals and at the same time close and approachable human beings. It is precisely this simultaneity of expectations that is problematized in many of the examples given. All this not only changes the appearance of politics at present, it also has serious consequences for our idea of political representation: Representation is increasingly

8 Kevin Kühnert in the podcast *Hotel Matze*, April 6, 2022 (at minute 1:19:10, translation J. M.).

9 It is worth mentioning that Kevin Kühnert announced his retirement from politics after this text was written—for health reasons.

coming into focus as the actions and experiences of individual, emotional, and vulnerable individuals. The display of one's sentiments seems to respond to the demands of political representation under the conditions of social media, of permanent communication, and permanent commentary. The image of the unempathetic professional politician, removed from the problems of everyday life, is increasingly countered with sentimental expressions of one's own personal vulnerability. This appeal to a general sense of humanity could also provide an antidote to the widely proclaimed hatred of politics (Hay).

It should not go unmentioned here that this revelation of one's own sentiments comes at a price. As progressive as it may seem to be allowed to be human in office, being human does not only involve a lot of work, it also entails some risks. It is important to remember that the impersonal office has always served as a form of protection of the individual. Politicians today, however, may even need to be reminded of the necessity and the benefits of the *body politic*. Quite tellingly for the proposition of this article, the abovementioned podcast with Kevin Kühnert ended as follows, which clearly should give us food for thought.

Host: "Kevin, thank you very much for your visit. I was very, very pleased that you were here. And I had the feeling that it was not a politician sitting here."

Kühnert: "Oh, how nice. That's a lovely compliment."¹⁰

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10 Kevin Kühnert in the podcast *Hotel Matze*, April 6, 2022 (at minute 2:26:08, translation J. M.).

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