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In all seriousness: Laughter in the German *Reichstag*, 1871–1914

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ABSTRACT

The ideal of parliamentary debate is often construed in terms of a dispassioned exchange of arguments. Yet in actual practice, emotions play a key role. As recent studies of French, British, and other parliaments have shown, a closer look at the uses of laughter in the plenary debates can provide a useful entry point for a better understanding of the atmospheric dimension of debates. Focusing on the early decades of the German Imperial *Reichstag*, this article considers the varying modes of parliamentary humour, laughter and ridicule and their significance in the context of rhetorical struggles and processes of political in- and exclusion. In comparative dialogue with research on other parliaments, it contributes to a more precise characterization of the internal dynamics of an institution still very much in flux. While contemporaries made a sharp distinction between exclusionary laughter and inclusionary mirth (*Heiterkeit*), a closer look at the plenary interactions shows that while parliamentary laughter performed many different functions, on the whole, it primarily constituted a mechanism of de-escalation. As such, parliamentary humour did not stand in opposition to (rational) debate, but played a key role in the management of difference and conflict that the parliament was created to facilitate.

KEYWORDS

Parliament; laughter; humour; German history; *Reichstag*; debate; in/exclusion

The first ever systematic exploration of humour in the German Imperial *Reichstag* was published in 1913 in a volume of satirical observations on the parliament titled ‘*Unter der goldenen Kuppel*’.¹ Its author, Hugo Frenz, had after a short stint as a stenographer entered journalism as a self-styled expert on parliamentary life. Taking advantage of the summer recess, he now took it upon himself to survey the members on their views about the *Reichstag*’s humorous side. Their response was lukewarm. A few members replied that they were not in the mood for such questions, while others did not want to be bothered with anything related to the parliament during their well-deserved

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¹H. Frenz, *Unter der goldenen Kuppel: Heitere Bilder aus dem Reichstag*. Mit 6 humoristischen Zeichnungen von Paul Halke (Berlin, 1913), pp. 168–84. The author had already broached the subject in H. Frenz, *Unser Reichstag: Was ist im Reichstag los? Wie arbeitet er? Wie lebt man dort? Worüber lacht man? Farbige Skizzen* (Leipzig, 1911), pp. 36–9.

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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vacation. The members that did respond – two Social Democrats, seven Liberals and one anonymous member who merely observed that he could not contribute anything as he had as yet not found *any* humour in the *Reichstag* – were hardly representative of the House as a whole. Still, their answers point to some of the main tropes structuring contemporary discourse about the character and role of laughter in the legislative arena.

The survey's respondents mentioned individual members like the Conservative Georg Oertel, the Liberal Albert Traeger, or the Social Democrat Georg Ledebour, who were known for their comic streak, and attempted to specify the different varieties of laughter originating from the speaker's chair, the government benches, various parts of the assembly as well as from the spectators and journalists in the galleries.² They differentiated between voluntary attempts to weaponize laughter as a rhetorical device and the unexpected moments of general hilarity resulting from involuntary mishaps. They considered the conceptual differences between genial humour (*Humor*) and more aggressive types of laughter associated with terms like ridicule (*Lächerlichkeit*), wit (*Witz*), and mockery (*Spott*). Finally, they expressed their general belief in the beneficial role of humour as a 'redemptive and liberating' element of parliamentary life, as well as regret about the lumbering dryness of so much of the *Reichstag's* daily grind. Considering the reasons for the parliament's overall lack of cheer, the respondents offered different explanations. While the Social Democrat Hermann Wendel ascribed it to the German nation's general lack of humour, the liberal Ernst Müller-Meiningen believed that the *Reichstag* had previously been a much more jovial place, but had become more subdued as the ever-expanding legislative business of the House left members increasingly exhausted.

Building on Frenz's respondents' observations, in the following I will take a second look at the *Reichstag's* humour, hoping to achieve a more detailed grasp of the uses and understandings of laughter in the plenary debates and their significance to contemporary political struggles. This effort brings us into dialogue with three principal areas of existing research. First, it can build on the systematic typologies of humour and laughter put forward in disciplines such as biology, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and the humanities. As one particularly wide-ranging example, Lenz Prütting's *Homo ridens*, which exceeds 2,000 pages, exemplifies, there is virtually no limit to the level of detail such classifications can achieve.³ Building on Prütting's work, the sociologist Detlef Grieswelle has recently offered a typology specifically focused on the uses of laughter in political communication, showing how as an integral feature of human interaction, laughter presents a powerful and versatile political medium.⁴ Grieswelle's differentiation between laughter (a) as an aggressive weapon to degrade opponents, (b) as an integrative medium to strengthen group cohesion, and (c) as a mechanism to contain or alleviate conflicts, provides a useful framework for a clearer understanding of the *Reichstag's* humour.⁵

Secondly, the case of the Imperial *Reichstag* can be related to studies on other parliaments. Since P. J. Waller and Antoine de Baecque pioneered the topic with analyses of

²Although I will not go into this case here, it is worth noting that one of the most famous parliamentary scandals of the late Imperial *Reichstag*, the journalists' strike of 1908 was triggered by journalists' laughter at a speech mentioning the 'high significance of the negro's immortal soul'. On this event, cf. A. Biefang, 'Parlament ohne Publikum. Der "Journalistenstreik" von 1908', *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 71, (2020), pp. 245–61.

³L. Prütting, *Homo ridens: Eine phänomenologische Studie über Wesen, Formen und Funktionen des Lachens* (Freiburg i. Br., Munich, 2016).

⁴D. Grieswelle, *Die Rhetorik des Lachens in der politischen Kommunikation* (Berlin, 2019).

⁵Grieswelle, *Rhetorik*, p. 45.

laughter in the French Revolution's National Constituent Assembly and the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British House of Commons, other scholars have followed suit with studies on a variety of French, Dutch, Belgian, Greek, and British Parliaments of the late eighteenth to early twenty-first centuries.⁶ On the German case, scholarship is as yet less developed, although Thomas Mergel's study of the Weimar Republic's *Reichstag* and a number of surveys on the Federal Republic's *Bundestag* offer some interesting points of departure.⁷ In a general sense, this scholarship offers a wealth of useful explorations of the variability of modes, themes and functions of humour in the parliamentary space. But since comparative studies have yet to emerge, it remains difficult to gauge how far the observed phenomena are to be understood primarily in terms of a timeless, functionalist typology of parliamentary discourse, of long-term processes of parliamentary 'modernization' since the late eighteenth century (referring to the emergence of political parties, the legislatures' increasing democratic legitimation, or their entanglement in changing media landscapes), or of the specific character of national political constellations and/or parliamentary cultures.

The last-mentioned possibility brings into play a third area of research, considering the specific cultural coding of humour in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany. In an outstanding recent monograph, Martina Kessel explores the meanings and practices of German humour between 1914 and 1945.⁸ She shows how humour became infused with a specific cultural significance, constituting it as a marker of German identity in distinction to foreign 'otherness'. From this perspective, the case of the Imperial Reichstag is of interest in two respects. On the one hand, it pertains to the nineteenth-century prehistory of the phenomena studied by Kessel, on which she only touches cursorily, but which has been the subject of other scholarship.⁹ On the other hand, the *Reichstag* also provides a test case of Kessel's specific interpretation of the cultural pattern of humorous Germanness, which she understands as gaining profile not least in distinction to the contrasting

⁶P.J. Waller, 'Laughter in the House. A Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Parliamentary Survey', *Twentieth Century British History* 5, (1994), pp. 4–37; A. de Baecque, 'Parlamentarische Heiterkeit in der französischen verfassungsgebenden Versammlung (1789–1791)', in J. Bremmer and Roodenburg (eds), *Kulturgeschichte des Humors: Von der Antike bis heute* (Darmstadt, 1999), pp. 127–48; J.S. Meisel, 'The Importance of Being Serious. The Unexplored Connection between Gladstone and Humour', *History* 84, (1999), pp. 278–300; Idem, 'Humour and Insult in the House of Commons. The Case of Palmerston and Disraeli', *Parliamentary History* 28, (2008), pp. 228–45; D. Dupart, 'Le Rire parlementaire. Une petite histoire des (Rires) de 1830 à 1851 ou l'apprentissage de la démocratie par le comique', in A. Vaillant and R.d. Villeneuve (eds), *Le Rire moderne* (Paris, 2013), pp. 95–110; M. Beyen, 'De eerbiedwaardige onderbrekers. Ironie en pastiche in de Franse Kamer van Afgevaardigden, 1890', in M. Beyen and J. Verberckmoes (eds), *Humor met een verleden* (Louvain, 2006), pp. 253–72; M. Rapport, 'Laughter as a Political Weapon. Humour and the French Revolution', in A. Chamayou and A.B. Duncan (eds), *Le Rire européen* (Perpignan, 2010), pp. 241–55; J. Ruhlmann, 'Rire en Chambre. Le comique parlementaire au début de la IIIe République', in A. Vaillant and R.d. Villeneuve (eds), *Le Rire moderne* (Paris, 2013), pp. 111–29; J.C. Zobkiw, 'Political Strategies of Laughter in the National Convention, 1792–1794' (University of Hull, PhD thesis, 2015); B. Nouws, "'De bulderlach van het halfrond". Vlaamse parlementaire humor in historisch perspectief', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 1, (2017), pp. 10–35; Marianthi Georgalidou, 'Negotiating Im/politeness via Humor in the Greek Parliament', *Estudios de Lingüística del Español* 43, (2021), pp. 99–121.

⁷K. Hansen, *Das kleine Nein im großen Ja: Witz und Politik in der Bundesrepublik* (Wiesbaden, 1990); T. Mergel, *Parlamentarische Kultur in der Weimarer Republik: Politische Kommunikation, symbolische Politik und Öffentlichkeit im Reichstag* (Düsseldorf, 2002), pp. 306–9; R. Müller, 'Fun in the German Parliament?', in V. Tsakona and D.E. Popa (eds), *Studies in Political Humour: In Between Political Critique and Public Entertainment* (Amsterdam, Philadelphia, PA, 2011), pp. 33–60.

⁸M. Kessel, *Gewalt und Gelächter: 'Deutschsein' 1914–1945* (Stuttgart, 2019).

⁹Kessel, *Gewalt*, pp. 11–15; A.T. Allen, *Satire and Society in Wilhelmine Germany: Kladderadatsch and Simplicissimus, 1890–1914* (Lexington, KY, 1984); M.L. Townsend, *Forbidden Laughter: Popular Humor and the Limits of Repression in Nineteenth-Century Prussia* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1992).

pattern of deliberative negotiation.¹⁰ As Kessel sees it, one of the major points of attraction of the idea and practice of German humour in the early twentieth century was that it provided both an antithesis and an antidote to the burdens of democratic discussion and compromise. As a practice, shared laughter provided a method of avoiding the need for debate – not only because any counterargument could always be devalued as humourless (not getting the joke), but because the experience of shared hilarity seemed to open a space of unchallenged collective certainty, getting by without any arguments at all. Kessel thus views this type of German laughter as a performative practice of identity politics, a practice of consensus, creating a sense of shared identity that seemingly suspended and at times even invalidated the deliberative negotiation of differences, and which exactly for this reason was at the basis of systematic – and ultimately violent – exclusion.

Kessel's thought-provoking interpretation of early twentieth-century German history in terms of identity politics, focusing on the cultural codes and practices of laughter, surely provides ample fuel for debate among experts on the period. For our purposes here, it highlights the ambivalent roles of humour in processes of political in- and exclusion in German history. As Frenz's respondents already noted, laughter could be a signifier of shared commonality, but also a weapon of rejection, degradation, and exclusion. How did the idea of German humour as a practice of identity politics and an alternative to discussion play out in the parliamentary arena, which by its very nature is predicated on the deliberative negotiation of different standpoints and interests? And more specifically, how did it develop in the German *Reichstag* of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, i.e. in a space in which the supporting elites of the newly formed nation state were directly confronted with oppositional forces that – from their point of view at least – could be understood only as 'enemies of the Reich' (*Reichsfeinde*)?

In the following sections, these questions will be considered in three steps. The first section addresses the cultural codes that structured contemporary discourse about parliamentary humour. In the second, we delve into the *Reichstag's* humour from an individualized point of view. Exploring some of the men who contemporaries considered to be the *Reichstag's* greatest 'wits' tells us much about the implicit conflicts and social dynamics behind the laughter in the House. The final section returns to the question of identity politics. It addresses the interaction between various groups in the assembly and the role of humour in processes of in- and exclusion in the parliamentary arena.

Framing parliamentary laughter in contemporary metadiscourse

In 1926, the aforementioned Ernst Müller-Meiningen, who before the First World War had been one of the *Reichstag's* most prominent liberal members, put his long-term parliamentary experiences down on paper. Besides theoretical analyses of parliamentarism, the resulting volume also included various tips for those aspiring to become effective MPs. In a chapter on rhetoric, the author addressed the importance of humour to orator and audience alike:

Hold on to divine *humour* if you have it; if you do not have it, the orator's greatest and most valuable gift, then at least *understand* it from the other who has it. Even that might be enough for success. Never reveal that you bear the superiority of the one who has a sense

¹⁰Kessel, *Gewalt*, pp. 12, 102, 173–4, 179, 259 et passim.

of humour with a heavy heart, and that you are grieving and angry about it. Otherwise, you are lost! ... What nature has not given you, you cannot always replace with artifice and routine. So do not try to replace the humour that comes from within and is a philosophy of life and an art of living with trifling, clattering, and ringing wit. Tormented humour like tormented wit is dangerous – for the listener and even more so for the orator. Do not forget: ‘*Mirth* [Heiterkeit] is very flattering to the orator, ridicule [*Gelächter*] is a mockery to the orator’ (Bismarck in the Reichstag on 8 May 1884). And Boileau’s words should also be remembered: ‘A young fool thinks everything is fair, even if a joke robs him of twenty friends.’ *A piece of wisdom that is particularly useful to politicians!*¹¹

Müller-Meiningen’s observations provide a useful point of entry into the distinctions around which contemporary German discourse on parliamentary humour revolved. He pointed to humour’s value as a rhetorical tool, but also to its dangers, when one became its target or lost the sympathy of potential allies through one’s own inept attempts at comedy. To some parliamentary speakers, humour seemed to come naturally. But as Müller-Meiningen saw it, the vain hope to substitute this innate talent with studied artifice mostly just exposed the speaker to ridicule.

Before the war, Frenz had already expressed a similar attitude, disparagingly noting that some MPs were so desperately trying to be funny that they not only prepared their jokes, but even recycled well-known ones circulating in joke-books. In his opinion, most genuine moments of hilarity in the House did not result from the speaker’s wit at all, but from involuntary mishaps, e.g. when the Speaker Count Stollberg inadvertently opened the session reading from the private notes of one of the secretaries, or when individual members or even whole party groups accidentally cast the wrong vote at a division. Likewise, slips of the tongue or infelicitous word choices regularly produced amusement. When the anti-Semite Wilhelm Lattmann declared his party’s support of the monarchy to be spineless (*rückgratlos*), rather than without reserve (*rückhaltlos*), when Heinrich Eduard Greve stressed that the topic of cremation was ‘ardent’, or when Paul Meyer stated it to be a peculiarity of the northern lapwing that it only laid eggs insofar as it ‘actually existed’, general hilarity ensued.¹²

Moments of shared laughter could offer a welcome relaxation of the tense or tedious atmosphere of the House. As to just how often such moments of mirth punctuated the debates, opinions differed. In an open letter published in the satirical journal *Berliner Wespen*, a group of parliamentarians’ wives purportedly complained that their husbands got to amuse themselves in debates whose minutes ‘abound with bracketed laughter and merriment’, while they themselves remained excluded on account of their sex.¹³ But as we have seen, other contemporaries complained that debates were mostly ‘serious and dry’.¹⁴

Depending on their impression of the general presence of humour in the *Reichstag*, contemporaries also developed different perspectives on its historical development. Reflecting on the short-lived National Assembly of the 1848/49 revolution in 1869, an

¹¹E. Müller-Meiningen, *Parlamentarismus: Betrachtungen, Lehren und Erinnerungen aus deutschen Parlamenten* (Berlin, 1926), p. 138.

¹²RT VI/2/1 (Dec. 14, 1885), p. 346 (Greve); VII/2/II (27 Feb. 1888), p. 1129 (Meyer); XII/1/CCXXXIII (Nov. 11, 1908), p. 5437 (Lattmann); Frenz, *Kuppel*, pp. 36–8; [Anonymous], ‘Der Humor im deutschen Reichstage’, *Neuer General-Anzeiger: für Heidelberg und Umgegend* (10 August 1894), p. [2].

¹³[Anonymous], ‘Vom verlassenen Schwvesterstamm. Offener Brief Deutscher Volksvertreter-Gattinnen an das Reichskanzleramt’, *Berliner Wespen*, (23 May 1873), p. [2].

¹⁴Frenz, *Kuppel*, p. 36.

editor of the popular weekly *Die Gartenlaube* observed that at this early stage of German parliamentarism, party hatred had already driven any semblance of dignity out of the assembly:

in halls where only holy seriousness could have legitimately prevailed, rude laughter of scorn and derision often rang out from the ranks of the speaker's opponents . . . Unfortunately, this phenomenon has remained dominant in all [our representative] assemblies, degrading them before the eyes of the entire world and belonging to the evils that cannot be censured severely enough, and which one cannot forbid the entrance into the new *Reichstag* in Germany eagerly enough.¹⁵

In such diagnoses, we find a late echo of a tension that De Baecque already identified in the early days of the French Revolution, between the dignity expected of parliamentary debate as a dispassioned exchange of rational arguments and the regular bursts of laughter that pervaded its everyday practice.¹⁶ But in late nineteenth-century Germany, the voices calling for a total elimination of humour from the assembly were few and far between.¹⁷ As exemplified by the responses to Frenz's survey, many contemporaries rather took the opposite view, lamenting the decline of parliamentary humour. Although the point of reference for this observed decrease was not always clearly defined and it was explained differently, parliamentarians with a long presence in the House would often regret a general hardening of the tone of debates. To be sure, such narratives need to be taken with a pinch of salt. Similar narratives of decline were present in other national contexts as well. In 1876, an American observer of the British House of Commons found the times of Benjamin Disraeli's 'epigrammatic sneer' replaced by 'Mr. Gladstone's serious mind', resulting in a 'dull and sickening uniformity'.¹⁸ Likewise, such diagnoses would persistently accompany the German Parliament beyond the Imperial era. Much later, Paul Löbe, the long-term parliamentary speaker of the Weimar period, would look back on the early years of the Imperial *Reichstag* as the 'good old days, when the *Reichstag's* debates were not yet spiced with poison and gall, [and when] humour came into its own more often than later'.¹⁹

Plenary interactions and individual wit

The differentiation between aggressive and inclusionary laughter not only played a key role in public discourse on the parliament, but also became enshrined in its practice. The official stenographers systematically distinguished between *Lachen* (laughter) as a designation for ironic or mocking laughter directed at an individual or group, and *Heiterkeit* (mirth), signifying a general cheerfulness shared by the whole assembly. Furthermore, they used distinct shorthand symbols for 'mirth', 'general mirth', 'great mirth' and 'sustained mirth', often specifying whether particular outbursts had come from the

¹⁵F. Hofmann, 'Ein Geschichtsschreiber der Wahrheit', *Die Gartenlaube* 19, (1869), pp. 292–4, pp. 292–3.

¹⁶De Baecque, 'Heiterkeit'.

¹⁷Remarkably, Ludwig Bamberger, who would go on to be recognized as one of the Imperial *Reichstag's* funniest MPs, had in 1868 taken the view that while humour had been legitimate in the early nineteenth century struggle against political repression, it should be eliminated from the more mature party politics of the modern era. L. Bamberger, 'Ueber die Grenzen des Humors in der Politik' [1868], in L. Bamberger, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5 vols (Berlin, 1894–97), vol. III., pp. 267–90.

¹⁸S.S. Cox, *Why We Laugh* (New York, 1876), pp. 186–8. France, to his mind, was a positive counterexample. Cf. also 'Parliamentary Dulness', *The Saturday Review*, (29 Feb. 1870), pp. 238–40.

¹⁹P. Löbe, *Der Weg war lang: Erinnerungen* (Berlin, 1990), p. 153.

left, the right, the middle or from all sides at once.²⁰ In a trade journal, one stenographer remarked that the members attached great importance to the precise record of such reactions, at times even going beyond the facts: ‘It has regularly occurred that MPs not only changed the text of their speech, but also on their own account inserted parentheses like “mirth”, “applause” etc.’²¹

The distinct character of the audience’s response was, of course, a matter of interpretation and therefore also of political contention, as an altercation in the 1879 Prussian Lower House exemplifies. The Catholic leader Ludwig Windthorst got into a heated exchange with his grandnephew Eduard, a left-leaning Liberal, about a remark the former had made about the latter’s deceased political mentor, Benedikt Waldeck. When Eduard closed his speech insisting that Ludwig, from his ‘narrow-minded ecclesiastical point of view’, would never be able to appreciate Waldeck’s greatness, the minutes stated that ‘lively acclaim and merriment’ (*lebhafter Beifall und Heiterkeit*) followed. Ludwig took the audience response in the second sense and pointed out that the assembly’s mirth proved that his relative’s remark was beyond the pale. But immediately someone on the left corrected him, shouting ‘It was acclaim!’ Ludwig answered: ‘If the gentlemen now want to turn this merriment into acclaim, that is certainly only an act of courtesy; / (Merriment) / but the natural feeling was different / (Contradiction.)’²²

Comic occurrences in the debates were not only a welcome relief to the members themselves. They also resonated with the press and the public. Biographical sketches of members invariably included a selection of their best humorous bon-mots. The same was true of accounts of debates or sessions as well as of more general surveys of the rhetoric of the Imperial Parliament. An even more systematic approach was taken in compilations of parliamentary humour. The first such collection, published in 1876, professed the aim to rekindle public interest in the legislative assembly. Too often, its editor Rainer Alemann maintained, the nation was presented only with the minutes’ dry totality. A more selective account, however, would show that the debates were not as altogether ‘lumbering’ as they appeared at first sight:

[O]n the contrary, usually they flow with a lightness and sharpness of humour, behind the cheerful mask of which one recognizes only too clearly the deep seriousness of the principles whose decision is under discussion in such moments. In such a collision of spirits, each party sends its most quick-witted orators into battle, blow after blow is stricken against one another, and the more surely the blow lands, the greater the applause that rewards the victor.²³

²⁰A. Burkhardt, *Das Parlament und seine Sprache: Studien zu Theorie und Geschichte parlamentarischer Kommunikation* (Tübingen, 2003), pp. 526–9; D. Morat, ‘Parlamentarisches Sprechen und politisches Hör-Wissen im deutschen Kaiserreich’, in Netzwerk Hör-Wissen im Wandel (ed.), *Wissensgeschichte des Hörens in der Moderne* (Berlin, Boston, MA, 2017), pp. 305–28, pp. 316–17. Cf. also A. Stein, under the abbreviation A., *Friedrich der Vorläufige, die Zietz und die Anderen: Die Weimarer Nationalversammlung 1919 – Februar/August 1919* (Berlin, 1919), p. 18, in which *Lachen* is defined as ‘the opposition of embarrassment’ signifying ‘sneering rejection’, while *Heiterkeit* is understood as a ‘reflex movement vis-à-vis involuntary comedy’.

²¹Quoted in Morat, ‘Parlamentarisches Sprechen’, p. 316.

²²PRA 1878/II (29 January 1879), p. 979. The satirical journal *Berliner Wespen* gave its own summary of the event: ‘The previous speaker will infer from the great merriment of the House – (Shouting: It was acclaim!) There was merriment! (Shouting: Acclaim!) It was merriment! (Laughter.) See, that was acclaim!’ ‘Parlaments-Feuilleton der Berliner Wespen’, *Berliner Wespen*, (31 January 1879), p. [1].

²³R. Alemann, under the pseudonym ‘Anselmus Facetus’, *Der Humor im Reichstage: Erstes Heft: Der Reichstag des Nord-deutschen Bundes* (Berlin, 1876), pp. 5–6.

Alemann's collection was originally projected as a series, but never came to fruition beyond its first volume on the *Reichstag* of the North German Confederation of 1866–71. The next year, the satirical magazine *Kladderadatsch* in a series of articles titled 'Humour in the German *Reichstag*' picked up the thread from the beginning of the Imperial *Reichstag*.²⁴ The series ran for about a year and ended once it caught up to ongoing debates.²⁵ The most encompassing collections appeared in 1893, edited by Tele-sfor Szafranski, and in 1910, by Matthias Erzberger, who would go on to become finance minister of the early Weimar Republic but at this time was still a relatively obscure MP for the Catholic Centre Party.²⁶

Although the editors' undisclosed and haphazard mode of collection²⁷ does not allow for statistical analysis in any strict sense, a closer look at these collections provides some insight into the role and resonance of comedy in the plenary meetings. Szafranski and Erzberger both categorized their entries into chapters. In large part, these were organized thematically, comprising quotations addressing individual members, parties, the *Reichstag* itself or various other state institutions. A second group of chapters was concerned with specific policy areas like economics, religion, foreign relations, or social questions. Under the subtitle '*Ergo bibamus*', Szafranski included a chapter on beer, wine, champagne, and other alcoholic beverages. Finally, both editors added sections on specific modes of humorous discourse, differentiating between jokes (*Scherze*), quotations, anecdotes, didactic maxims (*Lehrhaftes*), humorous poems and finally the rather unspecific category of *Redeblüten* (literally: flowers of speech), which covered a wide variety of slips of the tongue, metaphorical mishaps, and comical turns of phrase.

Beyond the thematic and modal range of parliamentary humour, these collections also show that moments of wit were far from evenly divided among the members. While both editors clearly made an effort to include a wide range of voices, more than half of the MPs mentioned appeared only once. On the other side of the spectrum, the five most-mentioned wits in each collection are responsible for around a third of all entries (Tables 1 and 2).

These numbers obviously reflect the respective editor's choices, which may have been influenced by personal preferences (in terms of taste or politics) and a sense of responsibility to their readers with respect to balance. Whether Matthias Erzberger really belonged to the *Reichstag*'s funniest members, or if he had other reasons to include so many of his own quotations, is a matter of speculation. Some structural conditions also factored into the selection, as members with a long-term presence in the House or who were particularly active in the debates evidently had much more opportunity to be witty. Still, there is no doubt that the parliamentary community had a quite

²⁴[Anonymous], 'Humor im deutschen Reichstag', *Kladderadatsch* (27 May 1877), no p.

²⁵[Anonymous], 'Humor im deutschen Reichstag', *Kladderadatsch* (28 April 1878), no p.

²⁶T. Szafranski, *Humor im Deutschen Reichstage: Aus den amtlichen stenographischen Berichten über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstages von 1871–1893* (Berlin, 1894); M. Erzberger, *Der Humor im Reichstage: Eine systematisch geordnete Sammlung von Parlamentsscherzen* (Berlin, 1910). Selections of Szafranski's quotations were reprinted in H. Morré, *Das Schwabeneralter des Deutschen Parlaments: Eine heitere Chronik des Deutschen Reichstages* (Berlin, 1909), pp. 143–9; W. Rullmann, *Witz und Humor: Streifzüge in das Gebiet des Komischen* (Berlin, 1910), pp. 167–70. Another noteworthy contribution to the genre is a review of the humour in the 1848/49 National Assembly in Frankfurt. W. Wichmann, under the pseudonym 'W. de Porta', *Weltlicher Humor in Geschichte, Recht und Gesetzgebung* (Münster, Paderborn, 1887), pp. 332–53; W. Wichmann, *Denkwürdigkeiten aus dem ersten deutschen Parlament* (Hannover, 1890), pp. 532–54.

²⁷Erzberger maintains that his collection was 'selected wholly objectively', but does not elaborate on what that may mean. Erzberger, *Humor*, p. [3].

Table 1. Telesfor Szafranski: Humor im Deutschen Reichstage (1871–93).

Number of entries	882	Mean	4.3
Individuals	204	Median	1
Individuals with the highest number of entries			
Ludwig Windthorst		85	9.6%
Otto von Bismarck		74	8.4%
Ludwig Bamberger		58	6.6%
Eugen Richter		54	6.1%
Paul Meyer		41	4.6%

Table 2. Matthias Erzberger: Der Humor im Reichstage (1867–1909).

Number of entries	369	Mean	2.8
Individuals	134	Median	1
Individuals with the highest number of entries			
Ludwig Windthorst		36	9.8%
Eugen Richter		29	7.9%
Otto von Bismarck		22	6.0%
August Bebel		21	5.7%
Max Liebermann von Sonnenberg / Matthias Erzberger		13	3.5%

precise idea of who the foremost wits of the assembly were. In some respects, such a reputation was self-reinforcing, inasmuch as it engendered a certain expectation of amusement in the audience whenever one of the recognized wits took the floor – in contrast to some of their duller colleagues, whose appearance at the rostrum was wont to clear the benches.

While Paul Meyer, the Liberal member for Halle, will be known only to specialists, the other names listed are familiar. As the House's acknowledged rhetorical giants, the speeches of Ludwig Windthorst, Eugen Richter, Ludwig Bamberger, August Bebel, and Chancellor Otto von Bismarck were listened to with much more attentiveness than most contributions. Still, other well-known names, like the Social Democrats Wilhelm Liebknecht and Paul Singer, the Liberal Rudolf Virchow, the Conservative Freiherr von Stumm, and the leader of the Centre Party Georg Freiherr von Hertling, are all but absent from the collections of humorous quotations. There is reason to believe, then, that some orators were indeed deemed funnier than others, and even that this reputation may have helped them build a reputation as a debater.

The contemporary press discussed such matters mainly in terms of individual character, minutely distinguishing between the sharp wit of one member and the jovial cheer of another. A similar biographical perspective has also shaped historical scholarship. The most extensive existing study of Reichstag's rhetorical culture, Hans-Peter Goldberg's 1998 *Bismarck und seine Gegner*, includes detailed analyses of the particular character and role of humour in the speeches of Windthorst, Richter, Bismarck as well as of its relative absence in August Bebel's contributions to the debates, which were characterized by a systematic didacticism.²⁸ While such biographical studies can tell us much about the different styles of humour, referring these only to the respective protagonists' character threatens to lose sight of the debates' interactive dynamics, and thus of laughter's role in the negotiation of in- and exclusion. To take this aspect into account, we can take the

²⁸Cf. H.-P. Goldberg, *Bismarck und seine Gegner: Die politische Rhetorik im kaiserlichen Reichstag* (Düsseldorf, 1998), pp. 104, 115, 212–21, 312–20, 487–94 et passim.

assembly's primary humourists as points of departure, but need to shift our focus to the ways they interacted with others.

A good place to start is the Iron Chancellor himself. While technically only a guest in the *Reichstag*, there is no doubt that he shaped much of the parliament's political dynamics during the Empire's formative years. Besides, his humorous side was perceived as a central element of his character. Among the many collections of his aphorisms and maxims – a popular genre throughout his lifetime and beyond – a subgenre focused purely on his most humorous quotations, often including a separate chapter on his 'parliamentary humour'.²⁹ Contrasting him with the 'master of negation' Eugen Richter, whose comedy lay 'in his dialectical dexterity, his extraordinary quick-wittedness, in his aptitude for satire and irony', the editor of one of these collections characterized Bismarck's 'gritty humour' as exemplary of his 'true German virtues, in which the German national character is mirrored'.³⁰ Thus, the notion of humour was tied into the meta-physical discourse of romantic idealism, putting it on the positive side of a string of normative oppositions like essence versus appearance, power versus weakness, masculinity versus femininity, and genius versus intellect.

In this context, Bismarck's humour came to be seen as much more than just a personal trait or skill. As an embodiment of German national consciousness, it was perceived as a way of being of the unified nation state itself. In 1911, another future minister of the Weimar Republic, Walther Rathenau, wrote in the *Neue Freie Presse* that the political genius of German foreign policy during the early years of the Reich had been expressed as 'excess of power, freedom and thus as humour in the sense of Bismarck's impulse (when the concept of humour may be understood as the sovereignty against mere appearance)'.³¹ Pointing to the tense international relations in the present, Rathenau expressed hope that the German state could again look beyond the mere numbers of economic and military competition and recognize that 'no fact and reality can emerge in the world ... that cannot be turned to good account with air and humour'.³²

Depending on his mood, Bismarck's humorous performances in the *Reichstag* could be a long way off from such lofty characterizations. Especially in prepared statements, he often found a fitting quotation or poignant turn of phrase that found resonance with the House. But in more direct, improvised exchanges, his biting sarcasm often had a sharp edge. Bismarck turned his irony not only against particular members or parties, but against the parliament as a whole. His regular quips about the 'irresponsible' nature of the parliamentary mandate, the 'demagoguery' of its members, and the 'impotence' of its decisions were repeated in the press and helped build the image of a statesman holding the line against the onslaught of the forces of modern political representation.³³ In some respects, this ironic self-distancing from the legislature is

²⁹A. Kohut, *Fürst Bismarck als Humorist: Lustige Geschichten aus dem Leben und Schaffen des Reichskanzlers* (Düsseldorf, [1889]), pp. 122–60; A. Gottwald, *Bismarcks Humor: Heiteres aus dem Leben und Wirken des Altreichskanzlers* (Leipzig, [1908]), pp. 60–64; F.H. Schmidt-Hennigker, *Bismarck-Anekdoten: heitere Szenen, Scherze und charakteristische Züge aus dem Leben des ersten deutschen Reichskanzlers* (Leipzig, 1909).

³⁰Schmidt-Hennigker, *Bismarck-Anekdoten*, p. [iii], 137. The author had previously published a popular collection of the Prussian king Friedrich II's humorous phrases. F.H. Schmidt-Hennigker, *Humor Friedrichs des Großen: Anekdoten, heitere Szenen und charakteristische Züge aus dem Leben König Friedrichs II* (Leipzig, 1886), pp. 11–19.

³¹W. Rathenau, 'Politik, Humor und Abrüstung', *Neue Freie Presse*, (16 April 1911), pp. 7–8, p. 7.

³²Rathenau, 'Politik', p. 8.

³³See, for example, RT IV/4/I (29 April 1881), p. 907; VI/4/I (11 January 1887), p. 339.

reminiscent of the kind of anti-parliamentary laughter that Marnix Beyen observed in the Boulangist opposition of the French National Assembly of 1890. But, of course, Bismarck's position was quite different from that of the Boulangists who, after their leader's self-exile, were laughing from a position of weakness.³⁴ Still, the German *Reichstag* had its own streak of parliamentary anti-parliamentarism – on the left as well as on the right –, which was at times also negotiated through humour.³⁵

While contemporaries may have thought of Bismarck as a quintessentially humorous character, when he became the object of laughter himself, he could react quite churlishly. One of the most famous exchanges about the topic of humour in the *Reichstag* occurred in 1884, during the debates about the prolongation of the so-called Socialist Laws, a bundle of repressive measures against the social democrats. Already in the first exchange on this highly explosive topic, the laughter that repeatedly punctuated Bismarck's justification for the law's extension provoked him to a sharp rebuke: 'Anyone can laugh, but they can't do it any better. ... You fail to impress me with such demonstrations, which are of a pre-arranged nature – leave it be! ... Refute me, but laughter – how easy is that! You won't believe how much I laugh when you are not around'.³⁶

A few weeks later, during the bill's second reading, things came to a head once more. In his arguments for the law's extension, Bismarck reflected on the early days of his struggle with the forces of radical opposition. He remarked how in 1866, after an unsuccessful attempt on his life by Ferdinand Cohen-Blind, a radical student that had hoped to prevent war between Prussia and Austria, not only the liberal press had taken Cohen-Blind's side, but even the police had not actively intervened, leading Bismarck to conclude that they too had secretly sided with his would-be-assassin. To the explosive outburst of 'laughter on the left' this remark elicited, Bismarck countered:

Yes, yes, gentlemen, you resort to laughing again ... This is the last weapon of those who have run out of all arguments and of all ability to give a reply: then one starts – if you'll pardon my expression – to laugh vulgarly [*banausisch*]³⁷. I call it vulgar if one doesn't understand anything about the thing one is laughing at. – You are all classically educated enough to understand the expression, and I would like to see this vulgarity [*Banausenthum*], by which one answers serious statements with nothing but inarticulate derision, removed from our educated society. / (Bravo! On the right.) / Do as I do. When I'm alone and think about you, I get into an involuntary hilarity too; but here I am serious.³⁸

In a manoeuvre typical of Bismarck's use of humour, he had turned a derisory exclamation from the plenum into an opportunity for a sarcastic jest of his own, dressed in the garb of well-meaning counsel. In his response, the Liberal leader Eugen Richter outed his fellow liberal Albert Hänel as the one who had burst out laughing at Bismarck's peculiar interpretation of the Prussian police's political attitude. In Richter's opinion, it was only human that such outbursts could not always be repressed when confronted with such obviously ridiculous statements. Moreover, he denounced the expression *banausisch* as

³⁴Beyen, 'Onderbrekers'.

³⁵Cf. T. Jung, 'Der Feind im eigenen Hause. Antiparlamentarismus im Reichstag 1867–1918', in M.-L. Recker and A. Schulz (eds), *Parlamentarismuskritik und Antiparlamentarismus in Europa* (Düsseldorf, 2018), pp. 129–49.

³⁶RT V/4/1 (20 March 1884), p. 164.

³⁷The word is derived from the Greek *bánausos*, signifying the lowly, uncultured craftsman.

³⁸RT V/4/1 (9 May 1884), p. 481 (Bismarck), 493 (Richter), 505 (Bismarck), also for the quotations below.

unparliamentary and pointed out that the chancellor himself was known at times to push the limits of the permissible.

Bismarck insisted on his indignation. He denied the accusation of an exaggerated ‘sensitivity to merriment’, stressing the distinction we already found quoted by Müller-Meiningen: ‘Mirth [*Heiterkeit*] is very flattering to the orator, ridicule [*Gelächter*] is a mockery to the orator’. The chancellor then went on to give a detailed explanation of *Gelächter*’s implicit meaning: ‘Though we don’t yet know what is going on, we don’t have the floor, and we probably won’t speak at all, but because it says “Laughter” in parentheses, we wish to indicate that what was said was received with contempt and scorn’. He added that his remark about the *banausische Gelächter* had most certainly not been meant to imply that the esteemed member Hänel himself was vulgar. Rather, he had referred to the general laughter from the Liberal side of the House. To the assembly’s further hilarity, he then singled out another MP, Wilhelm Struve, who had joined in the general guffaw a little belatedly, leading Bismarck to conclude that Struve’s political friends had perhaps needed to explain to him why he should have laughed, after which the MP had then diligently joined into the ‘business-like laughter’ as one of the ‘duties to his party’.

The altercation, and especially the expression *banausisches Gelächter*, provoked abundant commentary in the contemporary press.³⁹ Satirists made the most of the contrast between Bismarck’s aggressive outburst and his general reputation for genial humour. As such, these events may not have been representative of the general tone of debates. Yet they did show that even in an exchange on an extremely controversial topic like the Socialist Laws, the House did not lose its sense of humour. The minutes of the two sessions in which Bismarck responded to the Liberal’s laughter show more than eighty instances of laughter of different kinds. And even when Bismarck objected to the Liberal’s aggressive laughter – he did so in a way that was perhaps irritated at first, but within seconds returned to a jocular tone. All in all, such exchanges corroborate Grieswelle’s observation that the medium of political laughter allows for the enactment of conflict as well as its containment.

Humour and collective identities

With reference to individual members, the assembly’s laughter often presented a medium of social demarcation. The ridicule that greeted members from unusual backgrounds – like the Polish country parson that stood out by his rural clothing style or the Bavarian brewer who got tremendously angry whenever someone said anything bad about beer – was two-sided. It demonstrated how these members failed to comply with the customs of the House, while at the same time reassuring the laughing assembly of their unarticulated common ground.⁴⁰ In terms of Grieswelle’s typology, this type of laughter thus again combined integrative and aggressive features.

Regional identities also played a role in this regard. In the British House of Commons, the Irish members had a particular reputation for wit, although in 1911 Henry Lucy observed that only the sardonic Timothy Michael Healy still continued the tradition,

³⁹For example, [Anonymous], ‘Parlaments-Feuilleton der Berliner Wespen’, *Berliner Wespen* (16 May 1884), p. [1]; [Kladderadatsch], ‘Instructiver Wochenkalender’, *Kladderadatsch* (18 May 1884), [1]; H.P. von Wolzogen, ‘Parlamentarische Heiterkeit und deutscher Ernst’, *Bayreuther Blätter* 7, (1884), pp. 268–75.

⁴⁰Frenz, *Kuppel*, p. 37.

while most of his compatriots had become quite dull by their gradual integration into the House's shared routines: 'the modern Irish Member is as prosy as he is fluent, his harangues being unlit by heaven-sent flashes of wit or humour'.⁴¹ In some respects, their equivalent in the Reichstag were the members from the Rhineland region, who were known for their buoyant and jovial nature. While this reputation often presented a certain advantage in terms of goodwill, in some contexts the expectations tied to it could also be a burden. When a group of Catholic members from the region supported the increased police surveillance of public inns, Eugen Richter pointed out the incongruity of such austere guardians of public morals in a people with 'a notorious fondness for gaiety and for merriment'. In his response, August Reichensperger tersely rejected Richter's portrayal of the Catholic Centre Party as the 'prodigal sons of the humorous Rhineland'. In fact, he and his friends had not lost their sense of humour, even during the anti-Catholic culture wars (*Kulturkampf*) and their accompanying police repression – which Richter had actively supported.⁴²

The mentioning of the culture wars brings us to the question of the role of humour with regard to political divisions. Especially in its early years, the Reichstag was full of members considered by the state's authorities to be *Reichsfeinde* – enemies of the empire. In 1875, when the member for the Bavarian Patriot Party Josef Edmund Jörg slyly invited the assembly to '[i]magine for a moment I were a friend of the empire [*Reichsfreund*]',⁴³ great hilarity ensued. But the political repression of the Catholic, and later of the social democratic forces was serious enough. How were the relations between 'in-' and 'outsiders' managed in the parliamentary arena and what role did humour play in this regard?

Jörg belonged to a splinter group that was part of the *Reichstag's* considerable Catholic wing. To the majority, this group and its primary political vehicle, the Centre Party, were 'eccentric'⁴⁴, as the conservative Moritz von Blankenburg put it. The peculiarly light-footed, often self-deprecating rhetorical style of the Centre's leader Ludwig Windthorst must be understood against the background of this precarious position. In his frequent exchanges with Bismarck, both tried to get the better of one another by turning their opponent's phrasings and metaphors on their head. In the press, such altercations were once again interpreted in light of the familiar normative binaries. While Windthorst's style was identified with irony, mockery and sarcasm, reminding one author of a 'French fencing master, with their pointed, elastic foil', Bismarck was perceived as a real 'orator and statesman', a 'commander who fights world-historical battles', rather than a 'clever skirmisher'.⁴⁵ In practice, though, these stylistic differences were as much a result of the two men's respective political positions as anything else. As Goldberg points out, Bismarck's sarcastic wit was essentially top-down, underscoring his elevated status and devaluing his opponent accordingly. Against this tactic, Windthorst countered with a mode of self-deprecation that turned his irony into a rhetorical weapon with the distinct advantage of deniability (plausible or not). By never really

⁴¹H.W. Lucy, 'Humour in the House of Commons', *The Windsor Magazine* 33, (1910/1911), pp. 234–8, p. 236. Cf. also, with regret about the Irish absence: H. Furniss, *Some Victorian Men* (London, 1924), pp. 111.

⁴²RT V/2/III (6 April 1893), p. 1719 (Richter), 1724 (Reichensperger).

⁴³RT II/2/II (12 January 1875), p. 963 (Jörg).

⁴⁴RT I/1/I (22 April 1871), p. 323 (von Blankenburg).

⁴⁵M. Ring, 'Eine Sitzung des Reichstages', *Die Gartenlaube* 18, (1874), pp. 291–7, p. 293.

going on the attack outright but rather making his point by way of humorous circumlocution, he turned a position of weakness into one of strength. In reading these altercations, one gets the impression that these men were united in a double bind of mutual animosity and appreciation. They came together in a mode of exchange that was as sharp-tongued as it was witty – and which was greeted by the assembly as a quality piece of political theatre.

While the *Reichstag's* Protestant majority's relation to the Catholic Centre was focused on ideological differences (with some regional elements sprinkled in), in the case of the other major group of *Reichsfeinde*, the social democrats, the ideological outsider-status intersected with a class element. Although most social-democratic MPs were of decidedly bourgeois stock and those that were not did their utmost to blend into their new environment, the very idea of the worker-turned-MP was enough to bring a smile to the face of the elitist majority. Another common source of merriment was the unapologetically ideological nature of the social democrats' political self-image, which could be easily framed in terms of impractical abstraction. Opponents often made light of the socialist idea of the future state (*Zukunftsstaat*), with conservatives comparing it to 'a large penitentiary connected to a general rabbit hutch' and to a 'general madhouse'.⁴⁶ Bismarck repeatedly reaped laughter by insisting that he was still waiting to hear what exactly the social democrats proposed to do once they had brought about the wholesale destruction of the existing order: 'You're 25 now', he remarked in 1884, 'you've reached the second dozen; I'll allow you the third; but when you are 36, I certainly expect you to lay out your full operational plan for the Constitution as it should be; otherwise I don't believe you can do anything'.⁴⁷ His successor, Prince Bernhard von Bülow, put a further twist on the same assessment: 'Discipline and willingness to sacrifice: 1a. Positive achievements, clarity of program: 5b'.⁴⁸ But the Social Democrats gave as good as they got, and in time, they were integrated into the *Reichstag's* culture in every respect – including its humour.

A similar development can be observed in yet another group of outsiders, the anti-Semites. In the early days of their presence in the *Reichstag*, these were regularly the butt of laughter. The first member to enter the parliament on an explicitly anti-Semitic platform in 1887, Otto Böckel, was derided for his wordy and pathos-filled speeches. But in time, he got used to the tone of the House and he was taken more seriously. Still, his bombastic style was appreciated much more in the public meetings in his native Hessen than in the *Reichstag*, where the tone of debate was much more subdued. Here, he was soon outperformed by his party colleague Max Liebermann von Sonnenberg. With a particularly coarse, striking humour, this member managed time and again to evoke a tumultuous mixture of indignation and merriment in his audience, never failing to draw attention to his speeches.⁴⁹

Unsurprisingly, the anti-Semites were also the group that insisted most emphatically on the unique character of German humour. In his attacks on the social democrats, Adolf Stöcker pointed out that their periodical *Vorwärts* was completely devoid of any

⁴⁶RT VIII/2/II (3 February 1893), p. 822 (von Stumm); XII/1/CCXXX (5 February 1908), p. 2915 (von Oldenburg).

⁴⁷RT VI/1/I (26 November 1884) p. 25 (Bismarck).

⁴⁸RT XI/1/I (10 December 1903), p. 58 (von Bülow).

⁴⁹Cf. [Anonym], 'Im Reichstag III', *Daheim. Ein deutsches Familienblatt mit Illustrationen*, (18 February 1893), p. 315–8; D. Kasischke-Wurm, *Antisemitismus im Spiegel der Hamburger Presse während des Kaiserreichs (1884–1914)* (Hamburg, 1997), p. 49–50.

humour ‘which is, however, so characteristic of German people’.⁵⁰ In another debate, he feigned surprise at a witty interjection from the social-democratic side, stating that this was the first time he had found any real humour in their utterances since 1863, a remark that was greeted by ‘Mirth and very good!’ on the assembly’s right wing. ‘They have wit, sarcasms, scorn, mockery’, Stoecker elaborated, ‘often of oriental origin. (Laughter on the right.) But they have very little of that homely [*gemütliche*] sense of German humour; this requires a certain depth of emotional life’.⁵¹

Again, it is not easy to unequivocally assess the significance of such speech acts. On the locutionary level, they excluded the social democrats from the community of the German nation. The reference to the ‘oriental’ nature of their mockery was a lightly veiled stab at the considerable number of social democrats who were of Jewish descent.⁵² The repeated laughter on the right may thus seem to present a paradigmatic example of exclusionary laughter. But if we want to understand Stoecker’s utterances on an illocutionary level as well, things are less clear. We have to take into account their tone, which is light, even humorous itself. While the ‘othering’ through laughter and the reference to the essential distinction between German humour and Jewish wit may seem to fit perfectly into Kessel’s narrative, the wider context of the debate shows that the rhetorical exclusion of the social democrats was not absolute. If we look at the responses during the whole speech, we find not only at least four instances of common mirth of the whole assembly, but also a few cases of mirth and laughter on the left. The Social Democrats’ reactions show that – willingly or not – they took the anti-Semite’s attacks in good spirit. One could say, they had a sense of humour about it. While the Social Democrats and the anti-Semites remained bitter political enemies, in the context of the *Reichstag* debates they could at times find common ground in laughter – and perhaps even appreciate each other’s comical jabs.

Conclusion

A more thorough, quantitative and/or comparative analysis of the laughter in the Imperial *Reichstag* could doubtlessly engender a much more fine-grained understanding of its variable meanings in different situations. But even a preliminary qualitative survey like the one presented above produces some valuable insights into the dynamics of laughter in the German legislature. In dialogue with Grieswelle’s threefold typology of political laughter as (a) a rhetorical weapon, (b), a medium of group cohesion, and (c), a mechanism for the containment of conflicts, it shows how the three functions not only overlapped to a significant degree but tended to reinforce each another in the process.

The long-standing opposition between German humour and ‘foreign’ (or ‘Jewish’) wit presented an important framework for the interpretation of laughter in nineteenth-century public discourse. In the press, parliamentary humour was often understood in such terms, too – to devalue parliamentary humorists who were understood as

⁵⁰RT X/2/VIII (23 Jan. 1903), p. 7526–7 (Stoecker). See also A. Stoecker, *Reden im Reichstag*. ed. R. Mumm (Schwerin, 1914).

⁵¹RT XI/1/V (9 December 1904), p. 3455 (Stoecker); Stoecker, *Reden*, p. 408.

⁵²On the common distinction between Jewish wit (*Witz*) and German temperamental humour (*Gemütshumor*), cf. Rullmann, *Witz*, pp. 79–80. For the historical scholarship on this question, cf. P. Jelavich, ‘When Are Jewish Jokes No Longer Funny? Ethnic Humour in Imperial and Republican Berlin’, in M. Kessel and P. Merziger (eds), *The Politics of Humour: Laughter, Inclusion, and Exclusion in the Twentieth Century* (Toronto, 2012), pp. 22–51; J.S. Chase, *Inciting Laughter: The Development of ‘Jewish Humor’ in 19th Century German Culture* (Berlin, 2013); L. Kaplan, *Vom jüdischen Witz zum Judenwitz: Eine Kunst wird entwendet*, C. Döring (ed.), (Berlin, 2021).

enemies of the Reich or to valorize those who, like Bismarck, were seen as embodying the true German spirit. But in the assembly itself, such oppositions did not play a very significant role. Although they sporadically surfaced in metadiscourse *about* humour, their clear-cut binary code broke down in confrontation with the much more complex practice of laughter in the house.

A second contemporary opposition, between exclusionary 'laughter' directed at specific individuals or groups and inclusionary 'mirth' emerging from a shared comical experience, had a lot more weight, if only because it was inscribed into the official stenographer's notetaking practice. While this distinction, too, was never as clear-cut in practice as these stenographic standards implied, the members showed a clear awareness of the different tones of laughter and knew how to respond accordingly. The common complaint that laughter at certain speeches was just as routinized along party lines as the acclamations at others may have been overdrawn, but contained a kernel of truth. This did not mean, however, that the so-called 'aggressive' laughter was necessarily only exclusionary in nature. Even the most scornful witticisms (and the sarcastic bursts of laughter that followed them) still presented a sugar-coating of their original aggressive impulse. As the conflict was framed in the medium of humour, the excluded party was itself invited to take part in its performance. While they were excluded, they were thus at the same time integrated into a common situational understanding. Genuine or not, the butt of the joke was under some pressure to 'laugh along'. As Müller-Meiningen observed, his worst mistake would be to show irritation, and indeed the debates show that even between bitter enemies, comic jabs were often taken in good humour. The *Reichstag's* laughter thus was hardly ever entirely in- or exclusionary, but rather combined both aspects at the same time.

For the same reason, finally, I do not believe that in the context of the *Reichstag* it is useful to oppose German humour to (democratic) debate, if only because this distinction implies a rather reductive understanding of the process of parliamentary deliberation. As we have seen, the *Reichstag's* debates were never a matter of argument alone, but rather encompassed interaction on all levels and in all modes at the same time. Beyond mere intellectual persuasion, they centrally revolved around the emotional management of interpersonal and inter-group relations – a dimension in which humour and laughter played a key role. Just as 'laughter' did not constitute only a weapon in debate, but also a medium of de-escalation, 'mirth' cannot be reduced to its role as an alternative to debate. In most cases, humour did not supplant or suppress argument, but rather created an atmosphere in which 'debate' – understood not merely as the formal exchange of arguments, but as the rhetorical negotiation of different interests and points of view – could thrive. As such, it played a key role in the management of difference and conflict that the parliament was created to facilitate.

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