

# An Interview with Dr. Konstantin Butz

Dr. Konstantin Butz  
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*aspeers:* What sparked your interest in American Studies?

**Dr. Konstantin Butz:** I was born and grew up in Germany in the 1980s. The popular culture surrounding me was American to a large extent. TV shows like ALF or, a little later in the early 1990s, The Simpsons went on air in Germany—back then still on state channel ZDF. They shaped my image of the US and sparked my interest in its culture. Although I had never been to the US, I had the impression I really knew the country. Just from watching TV shows and movies, I knew where you would find the couch in a suburban home, what the fridge would look like, and that there would always be a giant garage where the most exciting events could happen. Of course, these were clichéd, idealized, and ideological images of American middle-class life but they really stuck for the moment. However, what followed and partly coincided were my impressions of the Gulf War of 1990/91. The news coverage of that conflict was disturbing and although I was still quite young I realized that the US and its culture and politics were more complex than the TV settings of suburban family shows might suggest. Ever since, an ambiguous feeling remained but also triggered a deepened interest in the United States and what the nation stood for. In high school I developed a passion for American punk music and skateboard culture, which remains with me until today. These subcultural influences introduced me to further political topics and encouraged me to consider more ambivalent and highly critical perspectives on the US and its manifold, often contradictory facets. When I realized that you could study American Studies (or “Amerikanistik”) at university, it did not take long to make my decision: It seemed like the perfect opportunity for me to follow my personal interests and take them to another level. Although I read into much more historical and also “canonical” topics during my studies, the passion for popular culture always constituted the main motivation for my scholarly endeavors. I think that is still the beauty of doing

American Studies: Particularly in combination with a transnational and interdisciplinary approach it enables you to deal with topics mattering to you personally while analyzing them within highly diverse and heterogeneous contexts.

*aspeers*: Have you noticed any changes or developments in the field?

**Butz**: A development I noticed and that leads beyond the academic field of American Studies has to do with my interest in intersectionality as I had already introduced it in the essay I published in *aspeers* in 2008. Back then, it still seemed to me as if the notion of intersectionality, at least in Germany, was limited to a rather academic contextualization. I myself had learned about it through university classes I took on African American literature and culture and it struck me as highly important that intersectionality and the critical analysis of interlocking vectors of discrimination evolved from a political movement and the fights and struggles of black feminists and their allies; it was a political necessity and not an intellectual curiosity that put intersectionality on the map. Thus, I always considered it rather strange to mainly encounter it during specialized academic conferences and in purely theoretic contexts. Roughly a decade after I first started working on it, I have the feeling that the messages, interventions, insights, and interruptions that the notion of intersectionality produces became much more visible and known in Germany, also beyond the academic field and theoretical approaches. The ideas and actions behind intersectionality now appear in newspapers, magazines, and (sub-) cultural contexts. Particularly, young people are much more aware of the interlocking differentiations, discriminations, oppressions, and also privileges that affect people in their everyday lives, and they are actively addressing and challenging the accompanying problems. I do not only witness that with many young students I meet at the institution I teach at but I also see it in pop-cultural contexts, alternative music scenes, and activist groups organized outside of universities: Intersectionality and the connected topics, their actual, concrete, and inevitable political relevance as well as their historical roots in the African American feminist movement are much more present these days. I think that is a very gratifying development. Studying American Studies helped me personally to discover and understand the importance and genealogy of intersectionality while simultaneously realizing that it constitutes a resource of direct political action taking place and evolving its strength outside of university classrooms.

*aspeers*: How have your experiences in America influenced your scholarship?

**Butz:** There is this very concise sentence in Jean Baudrillard’s travelogue *America* (1986): “My hunting grounds are the deserts, the mountains, Los Angeles, the freeways, the Safeways, the ghost towns, or the downtowns, not lectures at the university.” Coming from an influential philosopher and cultural theorist, I always thought of this quote as highly inspiring. Baudrillard implies that his insights do not evolve in the theoretical surroundings of the university but are gathered in everyday life, on the road, and on site: in America. Admittedly, there is a certain romanticism in this statement and pulled out of its context it also seems as if it is pervaded by the very American myth of mobility, movement, and a nation that is not only characterized but was also built by adventurous wayfarers and pragmatic explorers. However, the point is that a theoretical analysis of America and topics related to the US can only profit from direct encounters and experiences in America itself. My dissertation and the essays I wrote would have turned out very differently had I not lived and travelled in America. During the research I conducted for my dissertation in California, I came across sources that I would not even have thought of and I met people who pointed me in directions that I had not considered before. As an American Studies scholar from Germany, I found it essential to get in touch with like-minded and particularly with contrary-minded people in the US as the conversations and exchanges that evolved from such encounters enabled and helped me to put my theoretical inquiries in perspective. Participating in certain events in situ can be an immensely enriching and revealing experience directly or indirectly affecting one’s scholarly writing. For my own research on skateboarding and punk cultures, it was very productive to “hang out” at skateparks and at concerts and to just observe what was going on there. Such experiences can not only be of ethnographic value but also enhance and fuel the process of theoretical and critical reflection.

**aspeers:** How did *aspeers* influence your scholarly path?

**Butz:** A few months after my essay “Rereading American Hardcore: Intersectional Privilege and the Lyrics of Early Californian Hardcore Punk” was published in the first issue of *aspeers* in 2008, I received a scholarship at the a.r.t.e.s. Graduate School at the University of Cologne where I wrote my doctoral thesis on the youth subculture of American skate punk. In my dissertation I picked up on a few aspects I had already introduced in that essay and particularly in retrospect it is quite interesting to compare my own writing from 2008 with the work that followed. Today, I would probably write the text entirely different and my former approach to

popular music and culture as a semiotic practice would not entirely convince me anymore. However, “Reareading American Hardcore” was my first academic publication. It is still of special value for me. I really appreciated the peer-review process that accompanied the development of that contribution. It gave me a perfect first impression of how professional research and publishing could ideally be organized. Realizing that academic scholarship was not an entirely lonesome endeavor happening at one’s home desk but an active contribution to an ongoing dialog of people that work in a similar field was an inspiring and productive experience. The feedback I received in the review process gave me the feeling that my interests were not only a nerdy passion but could also be part of an academic discourse. It is great to see that *aspeers* became a firmly established constant for the publication of emerging voices in American Studies.

**aspeers:** What has been your career development from *aspeers* until now?

**Butz:** After finishing my dissertation in 2011, I applied for a position at an art university in 2012: The Academy of Media Arts Cologne had been looking for someone with an expertise in subcultures and with a freshly submitted doctoral thesis on skateboarding punk kids in America I somehow seemed to fit the requirements. I was very lucky to receive that position and I have been working there ever since. I really love the environment of an art university and I always experienced it as highly productive to enter the discourses and participate in the practices of art and aesthetics with my perspective as someone who has been trained in American and Cultural Studies.

**aspeers:** What are your current projects?

**Butz:** In 2018 I published the anthology *Skateboard Studies* (Koenig Books, London, 2018) with my colleague Christian Peters. The title somehow speaks for itself and it proves that this topic still sticks with me. I am currently working on an essay contribution that considers skateboarding from a queer perspective and I assume that a few smaller pieces on skateboarding will still follow. However, working at an art university has influenced me in manifold other ways over the last years and, of course, there are always smaller and bigger catalog contributions, book publications, and magazine articles to work on while organizing talks and supporting and supervising art projects. Working and teaching at the Academy of Media Arts Cologne is very rich in variety. Another anthology that was just recently published is a book about the so-called “Litfaßsäule” or advertising column

(*Urbane Poesie: Ende und Aktualität der Litfaßsäule*, Von Halem Verlag, Köln, 2020) I co-edited with my colleagues Heike Ander and Hans Ulrich Reck. In that book I wrote a piece on graffiti as a form of critique of public advertising. It might constitute a good example of how my former studies interact with my current interests and position: The context I wrote this essay in focuses on art and artists' interventions in public space in Germany, while many of the references I use to develop my argument come from American popular culture. I think it is safe to say that although I did not follow the classic academic path of an American Studies scholar at university, my interest in American culture and its transnational influences still plays a decisive role in my current projects.

*aspeers*: What is it like to work on “alternative” topics?

**Butz**: I do not think of the topics I work on as “alternative.” For me, my research topics are simply the very concrete and obvious phenomena I encounter in everyday life and in everyday culture. I consider it as one of the highest values and merits—or as I implied in the beginning: the beauty—of American Studies and Cultural Studies that their fields of research have always included analytical and critical approaches dealing with popular culture. Everyday life, i.e. what moves people, what touches people, what directly affects people on a daily basis—be it a novel, a poem, a traditional folk song, a pop hit, the setting of a suburban home, the design of a certain car, a fashion brand, a dance, a sport or, for that matter, a skateboard—always played a role in the study of America and its culture. Or, to say the least, it could play a role. You just have to be interested, find a comprehensible method, and then start your research.

*aspeers*: What is your relationship to and what are your thoughts about this year's journal topic of pride and shame in America?

**Butz**: Pride and shame are extraordinarily complex and complicated concepts. I am not an expert in the discourses surrounding these topics and thus my thoughts on them are rather intuitive. As someone who was born in Germany I was lucky enough to be exposed to a highly critical take on pride—particularly on national pride—from an early age on. At school, in peer groups, and at home I was taught and encouraged to consider and to face up to the historical responsibilities following from Germany's past—a past intoxicated by national pride. Living up to these responsibilities did and does not merely mean working through ritualized ways of commemoration but, more importantly, it requires active forms of

awareness and critical commitment. As a consequence, pride and shame have become words of seismographic effect for me. Whenever and wherever I come across them I sense a very unmistakable note of caution and feel a responsibility, both as a citizen and as scholar, to critically question and analyze the accompanying effects, narratives, and ideologies. Of course, pride and shame have different connotations and need to be differently contextualized in Germany and the US. Most certainly there are contexts in which pride—similar to the strategic essentialism introduced in the postcolonial theories by Gayatri Spivak—can be of productive political relevance and importance for minority groups and their struggles against dominant and discriminatory forces. Taking pride in your heritage would, for example, mean something very different for Native Americans or African Americans in opposition to white Anglo-Saxon Americans or Germans. In that sense, my answer and my decidedly critical take on pride remain superficial at this point and can only try to draw a very generalizing picture. As I mentioned above, I am approaching your question rather intuitively here. With that in mind, I would say that my view on pride and shame, on both sides of the Atlantic, would always be filtered through a highly critical and also highly skeptical lens. Pride, as I would characterize it more generally—and apart from the mentioned exceptions in which it is enmeshed in acts of political organization and resistance of suppressed minority groups—first and foremost seems to be based on the distinction from, if not the discrimination and vilification of, an imagined and inferior other. Regardless of whether pride is projected onto one's identity or an object, whether pride is taken in a certain nationality or a specific achievement, it always implies that something qualifies as distinctly superior and better in contrast to an inferior opposite of lesser value, be it discursive or material. In that logic, such an opposite would almost automatically trigger associations of shame—shame as a constitutive counterpart of the concept of pride. Construed as a binary conception related to similar opposites such as good and bad, success and failure, or winning and losing, pride and shame often seem to postulate an overly simplified worldview not leaving any space for the complexity and diversity characterizing human life. Thus, I am really looking forward to reading the present issue of *aspeers* and learning more about the perspectives that young American Studies scholars develop on this topic and its complexities. Particularly in view of a US president who propagates a form of national pride exclusively functioning through the discrimination, mockery, exclusion, and shaming of everyone who does not fit into his concept of what it means to be a

successful American, I could hardly think of a more timely moment for an American Studies journal to analytically approach the underlying specificities, problems, and contradictions.