WHY CONSIDER THE POPULAR PRESS IN POST-1848 GERMANY?

Chase Richards
FREE UNIVERSITY OF BERLIN
2014 FRITZ STERN DISSERTATION PRIZE WINNER

“I skimmed the papers every day for news from home — German leaders were too heavy for my taste, in fact they are so at the present day! — and read short pieces of poetry and an occasional story in the Gartenlaube or Über Land und Meer. But I kept carefully in abeyance whatever looked like literature.”

Upon reaching Göttingen in 1861 to begin his philological training, the American James Morgan Hart decided that he would restrict himself to grammar and light reading while coming to grips with the German language, the better to savor its “literature” later. Hart’s unambiguous judgment on two illustrated magazines in that stubborn tongue was pronounced in passing, but it prompts a valid question: why devote serious attention to such things?

On the one hand, a proponent might argue from the standpoint of cultural impact, a perspective missing amid the personal recollections and Matthew Arnold quotations in Hart’s account. Yet what to Hart were merely functional illustrated magazines, known in their day most consistently as “family papers” (Familienblätter), commanded by the mid-1870s an effective readership of several million, handily outstripping any other German-language press genre. Their “naïve optimism about progress, the credulousness about science, the enlightened ambitions, the sentimental inclinations” struck a German writing during the Cold War, with reference to the Gartenlaube and its period, as an alien combination. Yet in the mid-nineteenth century these were fresh and compelling qualities; they also generated sales, and they helped to make the family paper the first modern mass print form in the German language.

On the other hand, there was more to the family papers than popular success, noteworthy though this was. They owed their takeoff to one man’s calculated response to the disappointment of the Revolution of 1848, namely Ernst Keil’s publication of the Gartenlaube (Leipzig, 1853-1944), which was followed by a host of...

1 James Morgan Hart, German Universities: A Narrative of Personal Experience, Together with Recent Statistical Information, Practical Suggestions, and a Comparison of the German, English and American Systems of Higher Education (New York, 1874), 33-34.
less urgently principled competitors, such as *Über Land und Meer* (Stuttgart, 1858-88). For Keil above all, the weekly periodical format, tailored to the perceived tastes and requirements of a more general reading public, seemed to offer a way to turn the intimacy of the home into a training ground for left-liberal political ascendancy in Germany, as well as for the democratic national consciousness that would be its natural complement. Of course, for both Keil and his imitators, this press genre also offered a potential path to profit in a rapidly changing print market. Lest one wax Arnoldian, however, let there be no mistake: applied liberalism and democratic nationalism indelibly shaped the medium, informing its textual and visual content. Indeed, it underlay the very premise of popularization, which was not without a political charge all its own. What is at stake in this story, then, is not so much an unconventional definition of politics — if in fact a pithy definition of the political is possible or desirable — but rather the ever relevant question of what constitutes effective political advocacy via new and exciting media, where the line between latent and overt political activism lies, and whether the profit motive is compatible with idealism and meaningful change.

What proceeds from this must therefore be a political and a cultural history at the same time. My subject of study — the rise, dominance and as it were the eventual domestication of the family papers — compels me to liaise between German culture and politics after 1848, areas whose kinship remains vague. The family papers constituted an attempt at popularization and were conceived by those in German publishing as popular creations, but I propose that we also regard them as having been born of the interplay between capitalist cultural producers and styles of non-learned consumption among the broader middle class, if not exclusive to it. In this case, liberal political actors were also cultural actors. Through the family papers, political advocacy and cultural democratization intertwined.

The third quarter of the nineteenth century may no longer resemble the “no-man’s land” reconnoitered by Wolfram Siemann over two decades ago, but our knowledge of it continues to lack the layered complexity and fullness that a pivotal epoch demands.3 In my dissertation I stake out a middle ground — both socio-culturally, between “high” and “low,” and methodologically, in the synergies and slippages between discourse and practice — in order to retrieve the contingency of German history in this period.4 Three powerful forces


converged after 1848: an optimistic faith among liberal German publishers, editors, and authors in the emancipatory potential of their craft; the growing diversity and reach of print capitalism across the Western world; and the receptivity of audiences unaccustomed to the attentions of the press but capable of supporting the first mass circulations in Central Europe. The convergence of these forces requires an approach that navigates print culture and political culture, in order to show how the earliest sustained expression of an incipient mass culture in Germany began not merely as a capitalist business venture, but also as a rearguard weapon for a liberal movement in momentary retreat.

Such an aftermath befits the ambivalent character of the Revolution of 1848, or better the “midcentury revolutions,” a polycentric welter of insurrections and reversals that shattered what was left of the Metternichian system between 1848 and 1851, bringing the cyclical drama of the French Revolution to a halting close. On its own, liberal nationalism had shown itself too weak on the continent to topple a restored ancien régime after 1815. With the shockwaves generated by the fall of the July Monarchy in France, however, it managed to tap social unrest, urban tumult, and radical mobilization to compel an array of concessions and reforms, many of which outlived the supposed “failure” of the midcentury revolutions and set a brisk tempo for subsequent state-building. In the heart of Europe, the challenge to the princely regimes of the restorationist German Confederation never enjoyed the unanimous enthusiasm of its parliamentary protagonists, finally withering in the frigid headwinds of revived state repression and internecine quarrel. The collapse of the Frankfurt Parliament, a revolutionary national convention, dealt a chastening but instructive setback to German liberalism, sharpening ideological divisions that transcended the factional splits of parliamentary debate.

These developments informed the rise of the most ubiquitous German-language press genre of the age. Like many a popular book or periodical in Western Europe and North America, the family papers emerged from a broadening nineteenth-century print market. As general-interest magazines produced for domestic consumption, they emphasized variety, accessibility, and wood-engraved illustration, a successful formula in an increasingly competitive publishing environment. It was expected that they would be read chiefly at home, perhaps even by several generations huddled together fireside, in the evening, sometimes aloud. Yet we know that the reach of the family

---

7 See Wolfram Siemann, Die deutsche Revolution von 1848/49 (Frankfurt, 1985).
papers actually extended as well to lending libraries, reading clubs, spas, confectioners, and coffeehouses. As for what they contained, the family papers featured, for instance, poems, serial novels and short stories, miniature biographies, anthropological sketches, current affairs pieces, travel literature, simplified scientific essays and, last but certainly not least, beguiling wood engravings. Though for reasons of affordability and literacy their readership consisted mainly of those in the middle class and higher, the family papers were conceived of by their proponents and opponents alike as being popular in nature. Indeed, “family” formed a kind of metonymy with “popular” for mid-nineteenth-century cultural producers, because the family represented a logical common denominator of the general public, a kind of step up toward the universal from the educated male reader. Everyone belonged to a family, one reckoned, and thus to produce for a “popular” audience was to produce for it.

What most distinguished the family papers from penny press analogues in Great Britain, France or the United States was the precise political inflection of their origins. This stemmed from the historically strained position of German liberalism between the state and the people, as well as from its characteristic optimism about the redemptive power of knowledge. By bringing a subtle mixture of education and entertainment into the home, Keil intended not only to capture a market, but also to galvanize civil society at its putative core and so resume the work of an abortive revolution. Harnessing the popular press to what was at first a wary crypto-liberalism, he would mold the politics of German readers without getting into trouble. To be sure, competitor publications of the *Gartenlaube* — most prominently *Illustrierte Welt* (Stuttgart, 1853-1902), the aforementioned *Über Land und Meer, Illustrirtes Familien-Journal* (Leipzig, 1854-69) and the conservative, Prussia-endorsed *Daheim* (Leipzig, 1864-1944), an important ideological outlier — showed varying degrees of political discretion and engagement. Yet all were compelled by Keil’s juggernaut to perform — or, in the case of *Daheim*, cleverly redeploy — its foundational assumption that diffusing knowledge in an entertaining manner would bring about a desired political outcome, ideally without risky political confrontation. The political ambitions behind the *Gartenlaube* were inextricable from its successful commercial formula, one that proved impossible for subsequent family papers to ignore. With the growth of the genre, however, came a routinization and to that extent a depoliticization of its popularizing premise.
 Executed as a study of editorship, material textuality, comparative publishing trends, censorship, visual culture, gender, and the history of reading, my dissertation tracks a set of coeval developments in German (and modern) history. The family papers modulated social change, cultural ferment, and the contest to define the uses of information in a complex society. In the decades before German unification they anchored an expanding layer of middle-class culture and liberal political tutelage. We encounter a situation in which profit-seeking as well as idealistic cultural mediators found themselves thrust into the position of cultural producers, a role that entailed ramified influence and painful compromise alike. The family papers allowed liberal middlemen — a function closely tied to purveyors of print in a variety of contexts — to assume a posture of careful activism between resignation and provocation, reassuringly buttressed by improved technology, capital flows and communications networks. Their story shows the resourcefulness of German liberalism after 1848, particularly to the movement’s left, yet it also reveals the weaknesses of what could be a superficial media liberalism, one prepared to make concessions to power, to public visibility, and to what it considered the needs of a more popular readership than what the press typically targeted.

This overview of my dissertation is divided into three sections: first, an attempt to situate the family papers within the context of German liberalism and the post-1848 political situation in the German states; second, a genealogical and socio-economic gloss of the family paper as a press genre; and third, the interpretive stakes entailed by a historic popularization effort that consciously situated itself between public and private. I close with some concluding reflections.

I.

To understand the political strategy behind Ernst Keil’s project, one must know a bit about liberalism in Germany. Well before 1848, liberalism had won a diffuse presence in German society, thanks in no small part to the associational life of the Bürgertum, roughly translatable as “bourgeoisie” or “burgherdom.” Bürgertum sociability centered on the emancipatory experience of the Verein (association, club). Vereine tended to erode traditional status distinctions by uniting participants in the pursuit of mutual pastimes like art, literature, theater, and music, as well as for explicitly political purposes as the decades wore on. They constituted an intermediate instance between civil society and the bureaucratic state that had made such creeping politicization possible.


9 One can denote this mediating capacity in a number of ways. See James M. Brophy, “Heinrich Hoff and the Print Culture of German Radicalism,” Leipziger Jahrbuch zur Buchgeschichte 19 (2010): 72-73. Brophy’s use of the expression “intellec


11 Since the 1980s, one has tended to interpret the Bürgertum as much according to its sociocultural comportment, its Bürgerlichkeit, as to its social make-up. See the summary in Jürgen Kocka, Bürger und Bürgerlichkeit als Probleme der deutschen Geschichte vom späten 18. zum frühen 20. Jahrhundert, in Bürger und Bürgerlichkeit im 19. Jahrhundert, ed. Kocka (Göttingen, 1987), 21-63. Scholars have thus shifted attention to the pastimes, interests and dissonant moral outlooks of the Bürgertum, as well as to its aspirations, desires and fears. See, for instance, Dieter Hein and Andreas Schulz, eds., Bürgerkultur im 19. Jahrhundert: Bildung, Kunst und Lebenswelt (Munich, 1996).
indeed had imparted to burghers many of the scribal and organizational practices that would eventually be marshaled to contest the state’s authoritarianism. If the Verein lost much of its luster in the wake of 1848, all but snuffed out by the reaction and then increasingly marked by social exclusivity and a particularism of various causes, it fostered cohesion between what historians have labeled a Bildungsbürgertum (educated bourgeoisie) associated with state service and a Besitzbürgertum (propertied bourgeoisie) newly enriched by trade and industry.  

In the Vormärz, the communicative vanguard of German liberalism, that small reservoir of university-educated men from which the Frankfurt parliamentarians would emerge, occupied the foreground of a regionally diverse canvas of mostly local activity. The composition of the formative liberal movement, which at the local level also encompassed merchants and tradesmen, suggests that what united early German liberalism was less shared economic interest than a mindset of municipal self-government. This also helps to account for why liberals hazily envisioned their constituency as a universal Mittelstand, or “middle estate,” which signified as much a moral marker as an archaic-utopian social category lying somewhere beyond class. Here resided not only the wellspring of progress and concord but the virtuous “real nation” (das eigentliche Volk), as distinct from the unruly “masses” (Pöbel) who were neither self-supporting nor capable of independent reason. This unease spilled over into uncertainties about where to locate sovereignty in a constitutional polity, particularly given the relatively statist bent of German liberalism.

Since anti-populism characterized European liberalism as a whole after 1792, there was nothing idiosyncratic about liberalism in Germany in this regard. Yet like post-Napoleonic political discourse across the German spectrum, preeminently in Prussia, liberals were wont to espouse some form of stabilizing accommodation with monarchism, and they believed in the importance of popular education as a means to political harmony. Indeed, the ethos of Bildung, or self-cultivation and spiritual refinement through education, came naturally for Verein-patronizing burghers, and in its at once inclusionary and exclusionary thrust it served the needs of both meritocratic ideology and the maintenance of social boundaries.
For what was the most energetic political force in Germany until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, all of this presented a dilemma. Ideologically, leading liberals envisioned politics as a pedagogy of spiritual reform in the manner of Bildung, with liberalism its sole enlightened pedagogue. Where institutions came into play, even once the reaction had abated in the late 1850s, liberals tended to focus their engagement on the forums most familiar to them, and which they dominated: Vereine, chambers of commerce and town halls, all nodal points in a compact nexus of familiar bonds. After 1840, liberal notables took advantage of infrastructural improvements to build a national complement to their local bases of power, though at an altitude where the regional, confessional, and social seams of their patchwork constituency remained indistinct.19 In this respect the thickening “networks of means” associated with the bourgeois epoch in Europe — in the market, politics, and communications — dovetailed with the distanced posture of German liberalism to encourage a light touch to popular outreach in the maturing movement, one made even lighter by low turnout among eligible voters in many states.20

Liberalism did not want for support that transcended interstate borders in Germany (ties to Austria were weak), as witnessed ca. 1847 by memberships of up to 100,000 in the burgeoning gymnastics clubs and choral societies, which rekindled the spirit of the fight against Napoleon.21 Most newfound popular momentum in the 1840s, however, stemmed from economic hardship, which rendered liberalism’s political stewardship conditional.22 Cooperation between the wider population and the liberal movement collapsed from late 1848 into 1849.23 The Nachmärz, or “post-March” period, may have seen liberal intellectuals dabble in “realism” and “political positivism,” but they continued to grapple with their relationship to the German people and with the contours of a public opinion that many still regarded as the prerogative of the educated elite. Some went so far as to harp on the fallibility of the people’s judgment and the political unreliability of the masses.24 The German revolution, so the logic went, had gone awry due to the effects of post-Napoleonic repression. Only with a “sweeping political activation and mobilization of society,” whatever that might mean in practice, would liberals stand a chance of asserting themselves against the conservative establishment.25

German liberalism “had constantly been a bourgeois movement” and, for that matter, a predominantly Protestant one.26 These affinities ossified as liberals showed themselves incapable of addressing

21 Langewiesche, Liberalismus in Deutschland, 34-38.
23 Krieger, German Idea of Freedom, 335-39; Sheehan, German Liberalism, 63, 69-74.
26 Langewiesche, Liberalismus in Deutschland, 111-27.
the needs of a growing working class, on the one hand, and in the
1870s allied with Otto von Bismarck to wage the Kulturkampf against
Catholicism, on the other. The loss of potential labor and Catholic
blocs severely damaged the prospects of liberal democracy in Imperial
Germany, enabling right-liberal and conservative forces to take the
lead as shapers of nationalist discourse in an era of mass politics.27

But this ultimate stagnation at the state level should not be read
back onto the Nachmärz. The myth of prevalent inner emigration
among post-1848 liberals has been put to rest, as has the notion
of a servile or ineffectual public opinion among liberal elites in the
1850s and 1860s, whose influence officials themselves could not
always resist.28 Below these rarefied climes, figures on the liberal
movement’s democratic left, many of whom found themselves in
exile or prison once the princes had regained control, now seriously
pondered what bringing the people to their side might entail. Some
explicitly called for the “resurrection of a political mass movement,”
indeed a resumption of revolution by popular means. Few entertained
visions of armed resistance. Yet however metaphysical, imprecise or
pliable this populism was, its frank criticism of liberalism’s shallow
roots in the populace bespoke the lessons of the revolution.29 As to
the means of redress, the printed word retained pride of place, and
for good reason. In the Vormärz, radical printers like Heinrich Hoff
had begun to seek a more extensive readership with hybrid takes on
elite print forms; such print entrepreneurs conceived of their work
as principled civic intervention and pushed a definite “agenda.”30
Nor can the explosion of incendiary and satirical fliers, leaflets, and
handbills in 1848-49 have escaped the notice of those who wished to
enlist the German people in the fight to translate liberalism’s cultural
vitality into real political power. This profusion of cheap print had
amounted to a “media revolution” in its own right, and it had proven
itself as a tool for popular mobilization.31

German liberals, then, had seen print bear political fruit before. The
candor of rabble-rousing broadsheets became impossible to sustain
in the repressive atmosphere of the early 1850s, but their populist
impulse did not simply vanish with them. By a process of foreign
and domestic adaptation, as well as adjustment to state controls
and the imperatives of print capitalism — a process that must be
reconstructed at the archival level — this popular political energy
went indoors, so to speak, whence it might reemerge with renewed
vigor. The family papers, first and foremost the Gartenlaube, were
the most potent successors to the early democratic experiments in the world of German print, reimagining the nascent activism of the *Vormärz* and the bold agitation of the revolution.

That the specific origins of the German popular press could have attracted so little notice points up the continued need to seek filiations between politics and networks of cultural production in scholarly practice. But a fuller explanation must also take into account the role of nationalism as a dominant *explanans* in scholarship on modern Germany. The family papers were not only nationalist but frequently liberal-democratic in orientation. Their nationalism must be considered alongside multiple analytical handholds and in historical context. Otherwise one risks underestimating the emancipatory valence of nationalism during the first two thirds of the nineteenth century — when it was more typically cosmopolitan and democratic than autarkic or paranoid — and overemphasizing ideology at the expense of practical causal factors in the development of German political culture. Indeed, if German liberalism hardly conceived of itself, to quote Elaine Hadley, as “a practical politics” like its British counterpart, here we see German liberalism in a practical mode, in fact, eager to engage the sensibilities and curiosities of ordinary people. This requires looking at the day-to-day actions of figures in the popular press and the physical texts they produced, at political actors who were simultaneously cultural actors.

II.

Commercially, the family papers could command the unprecedented circulations they did because their pioneers carved out new market niches from social formations that had been developing since the eighteenth century; they leveraged low subscription costs and aggressive methods of distribution to reach a readership weaned largely on religious texts and simple printed miscellany. The family papers took root in the shifting soils of sociocultural change.

They also accreted amid transnational cultural transfers, to which we first turn. The genre would have been unimaginable without the popularizing precedent set by the British penny press, a creation of the publishing laboratory that Great Britain became after the late seventeenth century. Of paramount importance abroad was Charles Knight’s *Penny Magazine* (1832–45). Friends in high places allowed the *Penny Magazine* to evade the stamp tax, and the artistically


informed Knight kept abreast of developments in printing and illustration. He valued classically inspired wood engravings as aesthetic aids to popular education. And it was to illustration, paired with a one-penny price, that the *Penny Magazine* owed a volcanic debut: sales surpassed 50,000 copies in a matter of days, and circulation held at around 200,000 before rising competition eroded its reader base, more dramatically after the 1836 relaxation of the stamp tax and paper duties.35

Yet ripples from the splash made by the *Penny Magazine* in Britain reached American, French and German shores almost immediately. In the United States, a Yankee penny press roared to life in 1833 with the *New York Morning Post* and *Sun*.36 In France, Édouard Charton, a Saint-Simonian and self-professed enemy of ignorance, followed Knight’s lead even more closely that same year with his *Magasin pittoresque*.37 The studious Charton would go on to launch *L’Illustration* in 1843, which followed one year in the wake of the *Illustrated London News*, the world’s first illustrated newswEEKLY.38 And what is more, the evidence suggests that this French penny connection formed a decisive channel of influence between the British and German popular presses. The Frenchman Martin Bossange, likewise in 1833, arranged to have his Leipzig publishing affiliate produce a German-language imitation of the *Penny Magazine*. The aptly named *Pfennig-Magazin* (1833-55) was a joint effort between Bossange’s German branch and publisher F. A. Brockhaus. Although the *Pfennig-Magazin* may have achieved a circulation of 35,000 copies by the end of 1833, with an eventual peak of around 100,000, there is reason to doubt that the dry, technical *Pfennig-Magazin* made lasting headway into any but educated strata.39 Regardless, the *Pfennig-Magazin* honed the craft of editor Johann Jacob Weber, who later founded the celebrated *Illustrirte Zeitung* (1843-1944), like *L’Illustration* a continental imitator of the *Illustrated London News*. Just as the latter was comparatively expensive, the *Illustrirte Zeitung* remained too costly through mid-century to win anything approaching a six-figure circulation, but it set benchmarks in illustration and exerted an undeniable pull on the family papers.40


Other forerunners of the family paper genre had already existed in Germany, yet always in dialogue with European developments. German periodicals participated in the steady but never absolute differentiation of newspapers and magazines that began in northwestern Europe during the seventeenth century. By the eighteenth century, the trend was in full swing, buoyed by the success of the enlightened, self-improving moral weekly. Between 1750 and 1850, the German periodical landscape gained a colorful assortment of instructive, literary, humorous, and eventually political journals and magazines, but this specialization came at the expense of the ecumenical moral weekly. Nor did the moral weekly’s successors enjoy the same cultural prominence, not least on account of rising competition from daily newspapers and cheap print. As such the German genealogy of the family paper becomes muddled after 1815 in the belletristic crosscurrents of the Biedermeier period, many local and ephemeral. Furthermore, an essential conduit in this period may not have been a periodical at all. As James Brophy has made clear, the folk calendar, analogous to the famous Anglo-American almanacs, occupies a special place in the lineage of popular political advocacy in nineteenth-century Germany. It set a precedent for subversive reinvention by engaged print entrepreneurs, furnishing a reserve of practices and insights upon which someone like Ernst Keil could draw. Like the folk calendars, the family papers would locate their work in the home, and like them, they sought a way into the circle of readers’ sympathies with a mixture of the familiar and the new, the quotidian and the partisan. German print culture already offered models for such tactics, in publications that both wove between categories and spoke to the family as an audience.

Together, these foreign and domestic influences provided a latent cultural toolkit that found broad, consistent appropriation and application from the early 1850s onward, as Keil’s political project quickly became a business success. Only then did the family papers take off in the German-language press. One survey has counted roughly a hundred foundings of family papers between 1848 and the late 1870s, when their dominance began to wane, about two-thirds of them in Germany. Vienna produced a handful, followed by Switzerland, in addition to Philadelphia and New York. In the American case a German founder was likely; how many Swiss family papers had German political refugees behind them is harder to determine. In any case, the most successful family papers issued from Germany.


43 James M. Brophy, Popular Culture and the Public Sphere in the Rhineland, 1800-1850 (Cambridge, 2007), 21.


45 Data drawn from Kirschstein, Familienzeitschrift, 153ff.
Structurally, how did their breakthrough become possible? Next to diminishing production costs, including for paper and printing machines, makers of family papers capitalized on ambitious, and sometimes illicit, methods of distribution and promotion.46 The colporteur, or book peddler, has long been recognized as a key to the startling circulations of the family papers.47 Dauntless scavengers for customers, the subjects of caricature and the objects of official dread, colporteurs roamed city, town and countryside at the behest of German booksellers and publishers. They peddled printed wares to readers, many of them isolated and without regular exposure to such products.48 In other words, when a family paper reminded readers that a subscription was “obtainable at all bookshops and post offices,” the simplicity of this message belied the intricacy of operations on the ground.49

Such efforts bore fruit. According to the estimate of one contemporary, journals and magazines made up over half of total German literary production in the early 1860s. However one might view the vicissitudes of the German book market at mid-century, non-newspaper periodicals were booming.50 This held for family papers in particular, which ushered in a veritable “age of mass subscription” even as other print media caught their breath.51 While sustained print runs for the major German newspapers dropped after 1848 and generally remained confined to the 5000-15,000 range, by 1860 the Gartenlaube had bested the old 100,000 circulation record of the Pfennig-Magazin, en route to 230,000 copies by 1867 and a zenith of 382,000 in 1875. Competitor family papers regularly sold tens of thousands of copies or more by the mid-1860s: Illustrirte Welt had a circulation of 100,000 in 1868; Illustrirtes Familien-Journal peaked around 1861 with 70,000; Über Land und Meer possibly reached 170,000 in 1870; and even the conservative Daheim saw a figure of 70,000 that same year.52 Thanks to their enduring topicality, as well as forms of shared subscription or reading aloud between friends and relatives, a nominal circulation of even one hundred thousand for a family paper may have translated to an effective reading public of over a half-million. In total, millions came to know the family papers. No other print medium of the day could boast of such feats in Central Europe.

At the same time, commercial success for the family papers was more constrained than meets the eye. The family papers stretched the structural limits of a society in transition to capitalism. Besides

47 See Kirschstein, Familienzeitschrift, 120-21.
49 Barth, Zeitschrift für Alle, 131.
distribution networks, the unparalleled circulations of the family papers rested on truisms easily forgotten: readers wanted to read them; readers could do so or could find someone to read them aloud; and they could afford a subscription or afford membership at a lending institution that subscribed. In the German case, what these factors meant together demographically is that the family papers drew their readership from social layers no lower than those in society’s middle, among materially self-sufficient readers with a basic to intermediate education, whose relative numerical dominance in the middle class made them a vital subscription base.53 The task of delimiting this readership requires two essential topographical markers.

First, literacy. What the term “literacy” denotes is neither geographically nor temporally constant, and its consequences are situationally dependent.54 Historians of early modern Europe have debated how best to gauge literacy and demonstrated the fluidity of “oral” and “literate” cultures over time.55 Asymmetries between town and country, men and women, regions and social groups patterned the spread of literacy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hence estimates of how many among the 35 million people living in Germany around 1850 may have possessed a reading proficiency sufficient to read a family paper must be taken with a grain of salt.56 According to one oft-cited assessment, the “optimal” percentage of Central Europeans classifiable as possible readers of popular texts stood at 15% ca. 1770, 25% ca. 1800, 50% ca. 1830, 75% ca. 1870 and 90% ca. 1900. The ability to read, of course, describes a quality distinct from the inclination to read.57 If by mid-century even a tidy majority of the population had acquired functional literacy, this does not mean that a majority read actively. On the contrary, a working-class culture of habitual reading developed only around 1900, and for reasons economic as much as educational.58 In the main, the available statistical and descriptive sources lead to the conclusion that regular reading remained, if not rare, then at least unusual. Only a fraction of those in Germany who could read the family papers in fact did so. The circulations of the family papers, half to a third of what leading British magazines reached in the mid-nineteenth

53 See Barth, *Zeitschrift für Alle*, 282-85. Roughly 80% of the German population lived below a middle-class threshold. The vast majority of the other 20% (three quarters is a conservative estimate) lived at the lower end of it. Figures cited in Jost Schneider, *Sozialgeschichte des Lesens: Zur historischen Entwicklung und sozialen Differenzierung der literarischen Kommunikation in Deutschland* (Berlin, 2004), 200, 226, 250.


century, simultaneously overcame social barriers and demonstrated their tenacity. Restricted literacy constituted the most elemental curb to textual access, but it operated in concert with hard material realities.

Second, affordability. At a few thalers annually, the family papers were cheaper than any German periodicals before them and more economical than books. Yet by no means did decreased production costs and razor-thin profit margins — four years passed before the Gartenlaube, at a circulation of 60,000 copies, became profitable — translate to wide affordability. Around 1850, even a comfortably middle-class German household made do with 800 thalers over the course of a year; households of the lower-middle class could see 400-700 thalers, while a sort of poverty line becomes discernible at 200 thalers. For working families able to support themselves, saving remained a virtual impossibility, and what set off the lower reaches of the middle class from laborers and the indigent poor was often a dozen or so thalers in discretionary money. A yearly subscription to a family paper, then, might require a baker’s household to give up a tenth of its disposable income, and the situation was only slightly better for the medical doctor down the lane. 

In sum, the family papers contributed impressively to the nineteenth-century formation of networks of capital, raw materials, expertise, and consumer engagement. Their immediate reach stretched well beyond publishing centers like Leipzig or Stuttgart, indeed beyond the northern German states themselves. In a seemingly straightforward 1853 advertisement from the Wiener Zeitung (see figure 1), one sees how a bookseller announces an assortment of magazines, including family papers, to the owners of restaurants, cafés, Vereine and reading circles. This is an important point twice over: firstly,
because the postal service was not yet an important means of delivery for periodicals, the interests of subscription-selling booksellers were intimately bound up with the astonishing success of the family papers; and secondly, although as mentioned only the northern German states and then the German Empire gave notable rise to this German-language genre, potential readers (and customers) existed wherever German was understood, stretching the cultural web of the family papers far beyond the initial remit of their political genesis. How the political as such fared alongside this success and visibility brings us to another set of considerations.

III.

With the family papers, we win access to intermediaries between high and low, a chance to see agents of acculturation in action. We behold peripheral groups interacting with novel cultural forms. Above all, however, not only do we miss the full extent of the modern sociocultural field without such popular media, but we also miss the richness and vulnerabilities of modern political contestation. From a liberal-democratic point of view, strengthening the purchase of public opinion on German politics necessitated a firmer footing in the political nation. By now, of course, the concept of the “public sphere” (Öffentlichkeit) proposed by Jürgen Habermas in 1962 has stimulated a discipline’s worth of monographs and collections, which in their criticism of his schematic view of bourgeois political authority — most notably for its totalizing bent, elitism, and effective aggrandizement of the male property owner as rational-critical discussant — have pointed up its momentousness for English-language scholarship. What must be foregrounded here, and what has attracted comparatively little notice, is Habermas’s dismissal of the intimate sphere as a nucleus of politics from the mid-nineteenth century onward.

With respect to the eighteenth century, Habermas depicted the “institutionalization of a public-oriented privacy” in the family, an intimacy whose claim to “purely human” autonomy from the market was fictitious yet crucial to the formation of the public sphere. It was from within the idealized preserve of the family that the subjective basis for bourgeois political authority, literary publicity, emerged. According to Habermas, the “structural transformation of the public sphere” to which the title of his study refers, indeed its “disintegration,” came about in the latter half of the nineteenth century with the end of a strict separation between state and society, which elided the


64 Habermas, Strukturwandel, 107-16. By now this complex architecture has been limned in works too numerous to mention, but see in particular Dena Goodman, “Public Sphere and Private Life: Toward a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime,” History and Theory 31, no. 1 (1992): 1-20.
intermediate space that had accommodated the public sphere as an outgrowth of bourgeois privacy. State interventionism merged public with private concerns, destroying the ensconcement of enlightened debate at their boundary. The family sacrificed its sociopolitical basis function for the bourgeoisie as the development of capitalism continued apace, while the intimate sphere was shunted to the margins of the private sphere it had formerly anchored; consumerism, meanwhile, peddled “pseudo-public or mock-private” wares in place of the literary publicity that had distinguished the two. For Habermas, consumer culture represented the inversion of a reasoned debate (Räsonnement) whose political efficacy had rested on freedom, in the ancient Greek sense, from the constraints of need and want.

Habermas’s complicated intellectual inheritance from the Frankfurt School, in particular from his teachers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, is perhaps nowhere more palpable than in the pages composing the final third of his influential book, not only its least read but its most dogmatic section. To his credit, and indeed in a study characterized by attention to detail, Habermas granted that commercialization and consumption per se were never extrinsic to the literary publicity he eulogized. That they somehow left its formative works untouched, however, while the later nineteenth century saw its debasement with the expansion of the reading public and the rise of the mass media, must strike us today as an uncharitable and untenable position. As Brophy has proven with regard to the Rhineland in the early nineteenth century, participatory political communication has never been confined to a tiny social elite in the modern era. Furthermore, the cultural products conveying information, ideas and partisan standpoints to commoners and literati alike have always been saturated with the logic of the market. Although the numerous expressions of a more egalitarian public sphere uncovered by Brophy were most frequently of a veiled political nature, owing to the restrictions of the Restoration, they tilled a substrate for the legendary Rhenish defiance of 1848-49, and eventually for mass politics in the German Empire. How this popular political energy would be channeled by subsequent historical actors remained an open question.

In the Nachmärz, I suggest that we look for this energy in the intimate sphere. For engaged publishers who wished to reach a wider audience, going into the home could be a conscious political tactic — and eventually a very profitable one — in the face of a reaction that permitted little else. Yet the family papers were confident and conscious

65 Habermas, Strukturwandel, 225-26.
66 See ibid., 238-42, 248-49.
68 Habermas, Strukturwandel, 252-61, 277-78.
69 James M. Brophy, Popular Culture and the Public Sphere, 304.
70 Ibid., 8-12, 300-302, 310-12.
of their clout, and they grew bolder as the years passed. Before their interiority, familiarity, and coziness had become the stuff of cliché, such tropes served as experimental conduits for liberal pedagogy in an often illiberal political culture. The family papers seem indeed to have occupied Habermas at least somewhat, for he pointedly wrote of them as commercialistic epigones of their eighteenth-century forebears. He singled out the pathbreaking Gartenlaube as a bellwether of “hollowed-out” intimacy, “an idyllic form of glorification in which the middle-class family of the small town receives and almost only imitates the living tradition of self-cultivation in the high-bourgeois reading family of previous generations.”71 Thus Habermas anticipated the present-day consensus that the family papers succumbed to obsolescent self-parody in the late nineteenth century, but in a harsher sense: they were compromised, he implied, from the start. My study demonstrates, on the contrary, that the intimate sphere depreciated by Habermas furnished an important platform for popular political advocacy in postrevolutionary Germany, if one with definite constraints. Rather than invoke Manichaean explanations, I examine the intentions of historical actors, the role of cultural practices, possible contours of reception, and the capacity of acute crisis moments to shape the popularizing liberalism of the family papers. Openness to the people meant openness to the market. With the foreclosure of a Habermasian reasoning public arises an opportunity to conceive of political inclusion along different lines, ones less black-and-white.

The techniques and processes associated with print capitalism possessed no inherent political charge. What they could effect hinged on how they were deployed structurally, by whom and to what ends they were applied, by whom and within what frames of reference they were received. The optimism of the family papers, however, tells us that their liberal pioneers thought otherwise: not only did the potpourri of knowledge contained within them appear to share an affinity with progress, but the technologies, genres, and networks swept up in their train seemed to move in tandem with the forward motion of history.

In my dissertation I demonstrate that the political efficacy of the family papers was in fact as conditional as anything else. What they could achieve as a mass reading phenomenon was subject not only to contests across specific sites in German society, but also to conflicts bound up with their own material textuality and with the reading styles of those who welcomed them into their homes. This plea

71 Habermas, Strukturwandel, 250-51.
for contingency comports with the findings of recent studies on the popularization of knowledge, a prominent feature of Western societies in this period. Andreas Daum has made a convincing argument for the coercive pull of success on novel realignments of culture, showing how assimilation into the main channels of German society tended to dampen the incendiary content of popularized natural science and transform it from a liberal concern into something politically defanged, especially as memories of 1848 receded.\(^2\)

The family papers were less invested in the popularization of natural science than one might expect, but they were exposed to similar pressures. Yet here structural explanation benefits from episodic investigation as well. Consisting of interconnected vignettes with a strong archival foundation, my study is able to relate not only the formal qualities and macro-level scope of the family papers, but also the stories behind them, which permits an appropriate sense of historical openness and possibility. I argue that the family papers cleared a space for liberal-democratic public opinion in German politics during the 1850s and 1860s. They owed this to their brief monopoly position as exciting new entrants to the German-language press. If their political texture proved delicate and their cultural dominance transient, what interests me in this regard is not any reductionist opposition of education versus Entertainment, or profit versus principle, but rather the particular warp and woof of the family papers, as well as the passage of a decisive moment for their evolution into more outspokenly political publications.

Following a structural overview, my study begins by focusing on the everyday demands of running a family paper, as well as on the challenges of magazine journalism in the family paper’s shadow: the former by charting the rise of the Gartenlaube under Ernst Keil.
and reconstructing, on the basis of dozens of personal letters, how he understood ends and means in the popular press; the latter by dramatizing the clash of viewpoints and the “popular” challenges that could accompany the production of a family paper *manqué*, namely *Unterhaltungen am häuslichen Herd*, which author, critic, and erstwhile Young German Karl Gutzkow edited from 1852 to 1862. From here the perspective shifts to material textuality and visual culture. Liberal notable and publicist Karl Biedermann’s cultural-historical contributions to the *Gartenlaube* give occasion to examine the dynamics of serialization in the family papers, particularly with regard to political content. The interaction between Biedermann’s message of almost self-generating progress and the family paper as a medium, I maintain, conveyed a liberalism both confident and self-defeating. Taking up several successful family papers in its sweep, the study moves on to inquire into the relationship between the technical and economic particularities of the wood engraving, so integral to the appeal of the family papers, and the genre’s characteristic projection of a world that could be visually possessed and mastered by the industrious hand (see Figure 2), rather than one that had to be changed through political struggle.

The dissertation ends with a showdown. The climax of the cultural-political joust mediated by the family papers in their heyday, I argue, arrived with Prussia’s ban of the *Gartenlaube* between 1863 and 1866. Sparked in 1862 by a short story that fictionalized the sinking of a Prussian navy ship in order to slander the aristocracy, the *Amazon* affair witnessed a direct confrontation between the conservative Prussian state and the liberal popular press. Berlin officials emerge not as line-striking censors of an older type, however, but rather as negotiators of a newly constitutional system of censorship; they also prove sensitive to the democratic resonance of the family papers. They are stymied by Keil’s ingenious attempts to subvert the ban in Prussia, a situation exacerbated by their growing commitment to due process and the rule of law in matters of censorship. If no clear winner emerged from the *Amazon* affair, I suggest that Prussian pressure moved the *Gartenlaube* — always a trailblazer and trendsetter for other family papers, indeed synonymous with the genre in the wider German press — to drop its liberal-democratic program in favor of a less trenchant liberal-nationalist advocacy. This speaks to the ductile nature of the family papers as political organs, as well as to the continuing power of repressive measures to impinge on the course of politics in post-1848 Germany.
Conclusion

The family papers, these “popular” creations according to the standards of the day, were inexpensive, illustrated, and appealing. They were the most innovative periodicals in existence during the third quarter of the nineteenth century in German-speaking Europe. It was these factors that together won them millions of readers between the 1850s and 1870s, when both their average circulations and their cultural influence peaked. For inspired trailblazers like Ernst Keil, the family papers might pick up where direct political action had left off, once the Revolution of 1848 had given way to reaction in the German states. In the family papers, instructive entertainment and entertaining instruction would form a cultural-political chiasmus that might, even amid such unfavorable conditions, make readers more progressive, at least in the sense of nineteenth-century European liberalism. Obviously, in the case of Keil’s imitators, who surely noticed that he was becoming a rich man as he fought the good fight, the ratio of political activism to profit motive might appear less noble; the *Gartenlaube* was certainly the boldest and most explicitly political among the family papers. Even as they exploited it for commercial gain, however, all exemplars of the genre were participating in what remained for a time an unavoidably political enterprise, until finally the family papers’ political capital had been all but exchanged for the old-fashioned kind. The full dawn of mass print in Germany broke not with newspapers but with the family papers, in their way the children of a revolution; they owed their commercial success not only to structural factors, but to a specific political constellation in Germany.

Such a variegated portrait of ambition and self-interest does not, I maintain, detract from an overarching lesson in this story. It is not just that the family was being exploited in post-1848 Germany as an incubator of liberal political authority in contest with a conservative establishment. The trope of upright domesticity and private property as bases for liberal political power is far from unknown to historians and literary scholars. Nor can this project’s rejoinder to Habermas — that the commercial infiltration of the family has occasionally had sincere political intentions behind it — shake up a historical discipline whose Habermasian phase has passed. Rather, we see here a convergence in which widely influential sociocultural phenomena seem to have had political origins, not vice versa. We see how something so ramified and so tangible, how something of an everyday nature — a magazine discussed by neighbors, perused
in cafés, even consulted by early manufacturers of mass-produced art for clues as to what sorts of picture might sell — could in a very real sense owe its genesis to the high drama of political conflict. This interplay is fascinating, for it brings together worlds easily kept separate in historical writing, as though our political decisions past and present did not inevitably return to us, in ways that change us whether we like it or not, as changed consciousness, changed bodies and changed habitus, which then shapes our politics all over again. When German liberalism came down to earth, so to speak, via the family papers, it affected lives and sensibilities in the astonishingly rapid way that new media continue to do. And then as now, politics may play out in surprising ways in the culture of capitalism.

In short, post-1848 German liberalism shows itself here not merely as a political movement with popular aspirations, but as a popular cultural force reaching down in some quarters to the fundament of people’s everyday lives. Yet, thus applied, German liberalism also proves susceptible to the constraints of business and early consumerism, the limitations of ideology, state repression, and even the logic of the printed page. The family papers almost single-handedly launched the popular press in Germany, and particularly once they became politically more explicit, they opened a space for liberal-democratic public opinion that one would be short-sighted to discount.

What drove the family papers, who read them and what they achieved all speak to the possibilities and perils of German history at a crossroads, and on a far broader terrain than one might assume. Indeed, there was much more than meets the eye where the family papers were concerned. They crystallized in a situation of political deferral and reorientation, hopefulness and experimentation, suffocating reaction and exuberant capitalism. They vexed editors, attracted authors, alarmed the police and delighted readers. They set to paper a convincingly popular side of German liberalism and led Central Europe into the era of mass print. The family papers, in other words, were tautly overdetermined and highly ramified in their reach. One would therefore be remiss to counter James Morgan Hart's characterization of the family papers with an equally monochromatic summation of what they accomplished in German culture and politics. That they did their work on both fronts, however, and changed the fabric of each, shows the worth of looking for big changes in unassuming places.
Chase Richards is currently a postdoctoral research fellow at the Free University of Berlin. His articles have appeared in *Central European History* and *Modern Intellectual History*. He is at work on a book manuscript provisionally titled *With the Family to Freedom: Culture, Politics, and the Popular Press in Post-1848 Germany*. His second research project, supported by the Volkswagen Foundation and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, concerns the transnational development of the German welfare state between ca. 1880 and 1960. His dissertation won the 2014 Fritz Stern Dissertation Prize.