

The background features abstract geometric shapes. A dark blue triangle points downwards from the top left. A light blue triangle points upwards from the bottom left. The remaining space is white.

Conference Reports



Migration and Racism in the United States and Germany in the Twentieth Century

Virtual conference, April 22-23, 2021. Co-sponsored by the German Historical Institute Washington and the Research Institute Social Cohesion, Technical University of Berlin. Conveners: Maria Alexopoulou (Research Center Social Cohesion, Technical University of Berlin) and Elisabeth Engel (GHI Washington). Participants: Payal Banerjee (Smith College), Ismael García Colón (City University of New York), Levke Harders (University of Bielefeld), Anna Holian (Arizona State University), Nadja Klopprogge (University of Gießen), Simone Lässig (GHI Washington), Katharina Leimbach (University of Hanover), Rudolf Leiprecht (University of Oldenburg), Helma Lutz (University of Frankfurt), Ms. Madhu (University of Dehli), Lili Rebstock (University of Dresden), Léa Renard (Free University of Berlin), Arvid Schors (University of Cologne), Adam R. Seipp (Texas A&M University), Lauren Stokes (Northwestern University), Till van Rahden (University of Montreal), Richard F. Wetzell (GHI Washington), Anne-Kathrin Will (Humboldt University, Berlin), Andrew Zimmerman (George Washington University).

Both U.S. and German history are marked by migration and racism. Throughout history, some groups in both societies have been racialized and marginalized. After the end of National Socialism in Germany and segregation in the United States, exclusion and othering continues. Commonalities in the construction of these “others” can often be identified, but differences in migration histories and contexts also exist. In order to analyze the interlinkage of these phenomena, scholars were invited to present their research projects in a two-day conference. A year after the original on-site workshop was postponed, the video conference was condensed

to lightning talks and a more extended overall discussions at the end of each day.

In her opening words, GHI Director Simone Lässig stressed the importance of transnational research exchange in the comparative field, as binational comparison cannot be drawn from a national perspective. Referring to the recent Black Lives Matter movement, convener Maria Alexopoulou then went on emphasizing the deep entanglement of migration, racism and anti-racism in Germany and the United States, stating, together with co-convener Elisabeth Engel, the need for a better academic understanding of these phenomena.

Anne-Kathrin Will started the conference with a presentation on the relationship between statistical surveys, categorization and concepts of (non-) belonging. Her research focuses on the population censuses of the Bundesstatistikamt in Germany, which has been compiling data on the German population since 1953. Specifically, she examined those categories that were introduced to differentiate between “Germans” and “non-Germans.” Since these categories were pre-defined and respondents had to classify themselves within them, belonging or non-belonging resulted from the categories defined by the authority. Thus, Will can show that the analysis of categories such as “foreign-language” or “national origin” reveal hierarchies and bring to light prevailing notions of belonging and non-belonging.

Following Anne-Katrin Will, Léa Renard presented an insight on the empirical analysis she conducted for her PhD thesis. Focusing on the construction of otherness through statistical knowledge production between the early years of the German Empire and the outbreak of World War I, Renard identified two guiding principles of classification: the national and the colonial principle. According to Renard, the former was applied on the territory of the German Empire,

first distinguishing between citizens and foreigners on the basis of citizenship. Second, categories like “language” and “birthplace” were used to promote the image of a mono-ethnic German nation since 1900. Simultaneously, on colonial territory German authorities introduced a racist binary classification between a perceived “white population” on the one hand and a perceived “colored population” on the other. Within this process, people who would formerly assume a role in between were forced into the “colored” category.

Migration scholar Payal Banerjee contributed the main aspects of her actual research on modern eugenicist thinking shaping U.S. and European immigration policies. Adopting a transnational perspective, Banerjee analyzes the historical and ongoing preference of the U.S. migration office for white European immigrants as guided by an underlying yet not openly expressed racist and eugenicist thinking. At the basis of modern migration laws in the U.S. and in Europe, Banerjee identifies the category of usefulness being applied to aspiring immigrants. This modern form of eugenicist thinking continues to distinguish between worthy and worthless people while simultaneously using racist categories to identify those who are deemed of use for the future nation and those who presumably are not.

Adam Seipp provided an insight into the intersection of racism and state sovereignty in postwar Germany. In this regard, Seipp studies the stationing of African-American G.I.s in Germany in the 1940s and 1950s. As part of the Allied military forces, they enjoyed more freedoms in Germany than they did in the U.S. South. At the same time, they also experienced racism in Germany. Thus, American and German concepts of race and racism interacted, creating what Seipp calls a “toxic stew of racism.” In addition, Seipp examines the power relationship between Germany and the U.S. Elaborating on two disputes over the stationing of African-American soldiers in Germany in the 1950s, Seipp shows that the ability of a state

to institutionally act out racism (by declaring who can stay in the state's territory) depends on a state's sovereignty.

Similar to Seipp, Arvid Schoers shared his findings on a specific group of G.I.s. Approximately 30,000 German-speaking Jews were forced to leave Germany or Austria in the 1930s and returned to Germany in the 1940s as soldiers of the Allied forces. What Schoers calls a "remarkable transition" can be observed in their changing roles from victims of persecution to actors in power positions. At the same time, they also experienced antisemitism in the U.S. and were subject to suspicion because of their German origins. Despite this ambivalence, Schoers points out that the contemporary U.S. was always perceived as a safe haven for German and Austrian Jews.

Building on her PhD thesis on intimate histories of African-Americans and Germans since 1945, historian Nadja Klopprogge elaborated on the cases of six African-American soldiers who applied for asylum in the GDR in order to settle down and marry their white West German girlfriends. Klopprogge showed how in these cases, migration was motivated by the desire of domesticity, which was considered a sign of integration, but remained precarious due to racist notions of a presumed white German and a black African-American nationhood. Their asylum claims were reformulated by Stasi officials in order to turn the former G.I.s into socialist fighters eventually ready to relocate "home" (the U.S.) in order to advance the cause of socialism and simultaneously eliminate racism. Nevertheless, all six of these African-American G.I.s managed to stay in Germany for the rest of their lives.

Anna Holian opened day two by presenting her research project on discourses surrounding antisemitism in postwar Germany. Eastern European Jews arriving in West Germany were associated with smuggling and the shadow economy. Jewish foreigners were seen as a danger to the German economy because they were believed to be evading taxes.

German authorities acted aggressively against Jewish businesses with searches, deportations, fines and raids. This created an increasingly hostile environment, which had a massive impact on the lives of Jews living in postwar Germany.

As second speaker of the day, anthropologist Ismael Garcia-Colón elaborated on the intersection between labor migration, racism and colonialism based on his latest publication on Puerto Rican farm labor migration to the United States. Garcia-Colón explained the difficult status Puerto Ricans occupy within the U.S. citizenship system. Due to Puerto Rico's colonial status, Puerto Rican labor migrants are seen as racialized others within the U.S. However, they are also non-deportable U.S. citizens. Treated rather similar to migrant workers, their non-deportability is conceived as an obstacle by white U.S. farm owners. Therefore, the introduction of an increasing corpus of laws discriminating against Puerto Rican farm workers can be observed, favoring labor migration of deportable migrant groups.

Lauren Stokes presented the core thesis of her first book. She examined social science research on guest workers in the 1960s and 1970s. While comparing Germany and the U.S., the scholars she discussed drew analogies from the situation of guest workers in Germany to that of African-Americans and Puerto Ricans in the U.S. Thus, these scholars categorized African Americans and Puerto Ricans (both U.S. citizens) as racialized foreigners. Stokes emphasized that this racialization process as well as the concept of race is never mentioned in the German social science of the time since race as a term was delegitimized.

Historian Madhu spoke on the criminal justice system as a tool historically and currently used by the U.S. government to enforce deportation and therefore manage migration. In two examples, Madhu showed how migration law and criminal law have historically been connected in order to justify

the deportation of migrants long before the Patriot Act following 9/11. The systematic criminalization as witnessed today can be traced back to the treatment of migrant workers from China in the late nineteenth century as well as Mexican migrants in the 1920s. What connects these policies seems to be the racist ascription of criminal acts to migrant groups as well as the creation of laws specifically targeting migrants.

Radicalization prevention and the conventional security studies are the object of investigation of Katharina Leimbach. She explained how the focus of German security authorities lies on preventing jihadism while neglecting right-wing extremism. Through interviews with prevention experts, she shows that the German extremism prevention system perceives jihadism as a problem by conceived "others." For many experts, the dividing line between Islam, Muslims and jihadism becomes blurred. In the fight against terrorism, they reinforce racism by perceiving a large population group as a potential risk while right-wing extremism, a phenomenon of mainstream society, is downplayed.

In her talk, Lili Rebstock focused on the nexus of migration and racism in the GDR, particularly taking into account the experiences of contract workers in the 1980s. In addition to the racist violence many contract workers faced, Rebstock closely explored institutionalized forms of racism against contract workers, especially concerning their housing, working and living conditions. She identifies the state practice of deportation in case of pregnancy as an institutional racist and sexist practice which denied basic human rights to the workers, reducing them to the use of their labor only. In another case, she outlines the colonial resemblance of many Mozambican workers' experiences, whose wages were partially or entirely used to pay the debt of the Mozambican state to the GDR. Additionally, Rebstock sees the GDR's official anti-racist self-image as an obstacle to efficiently addressing racist practices on the personal as well as on the state level.

In the conference's final presentation, Rudolf Leiprecht and Helma Lutz urged German scholars to apply an intersectional use of the term racism. Because the term race was avoided after the Shoah, Leiprecht and Lutz clarified, "culture" was brought in as a terminological hiding place. While acknowledging the differences between antisemitism, colonial racism, and anti-Muslim racism, they also argued for recognizing the commonality that lies in the construction of the "other."

At the end of both days, all participants were invited to enter into an open discussion. A central topic was the divergent understanding of race and racism in the U.S. and Germany. This is largely due to the different historical development and current use of the terms in both countries. Especially in the white German public, the term race is still closely related to antisemitism and the Nazi regime. Therefore, racism is oftentimes believed to have disappeared after the defeat of National Socialism. However, some participants argued in favor of using race as an analytical category in German academia and fostering the analysis of systemic dimensions of racism in Germany. Regarding the relation between racism and migration, participants argued that the categorization as migrant in both countries is still largely influenced by racist thinking. Therefore, researchers are asked to reflect on how they apply the term "migrant" in their work. Furthermore, it was noted that with the global movement of migrants knowledge about racism travels as well. This is largely enhanced by the rise of digitization, which allows the global sharing of anti-racist knowledge and practices as well as racist ideas and practices. Finally, participants identified anti-racism as a separate research field. They agreed on the need to further include the categories of class, power status, and gender into the analysis of both racism as well as anti-racism.

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