Global Dimensions of Racism in the Modern World: Comparative and Transnational Perspectives

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The conference aimed to examine how racial ideologies and practices created, shaped, and legitimized systems of domination in the modern world. Emphasizing the global nature of racism, the conference brought together scholars from various disciplines and regional specializations to explore this phenomenon from comparative and transnational perspectives. In his welcome remarks, Manfred Berg (University of Heidelberg) briefly discussed the historiographical significance of the conference and sketched out a tentative research agenda for a global approach to the history of race and racism. Historians, he said, had so far shied away from writing a major synthesis on the topic, partly because they tended to focus on their particular area of expertise. Berg stressed that the conference was unlikely to produce a truly global narrative, since it deliberately sought to foster a pluralistic approach that would produce disagreements and controversies. Addressing some of the most vital research questions, Berg first mentioned the problem of definitions. Few scholars questioned the constructed nature of race, he said, but there was disagreement as to whether the term racism ought to be used only for ideologies and practices that emphasize putative biological differences and hierarchies between humans, or whether it should also cover exclusionary concepts based on cultural difference. A related question was how race, class prejudice, and religious stigmatization interact. The origins and diffusion of notions of race and racism across the globe were one of the most important research questions the conference ought to address, Berg said.

The conference's first panel focused on Racism and Slavery. Michael Zeuske (University of Cologne) talked about slavery, post-emancipation, and the construction of race in Cuba in the nineteenth century. Zeuske stated that the shift toward the use of African slaves in the Atlantic world between 1650 and 1850 did not necessarily require deliberate racialization. In Cuba, this changed in the early nineteenth century, when Cuban intellectual Francisco de Arango y Parreno formulated theories of biological differences between „races" to justify the legal exclusion and social subjugation of blacks on the Island. According to Zeuske, racial differences continued to play an important role among free slaves in post-emancipation Cuba. Zeuske argued that Cuban nationalism, despite propagated color-blindness, also contained racial ideas. In his paper on historiographical debates on slavery and race, Peter Kolchin (University of Delaware) warned against seeing race as the primary characteristic of slavery in North America. While race certainly mattered, not all slave systems were based on race. In addition, generalizations about the racial nature of slavery would obscure differences with regard to change over time and regional variations. Jennifer Morgan (New York University) discussed the interrelationship between colonial numeracy, gender, and racial thinking in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. According to Morgan, the slave trade and the arithmetical calculations it entailed reflected and contributed to a racist discourse that commodified and dehumanized African women, men, and children. In seventeenth century England, being subjected to being counted to gather demographic data was considered invasive and degrading, suggesting that numeracy was part of a „political arithmetic" that contained racist elements.

The keynote address was delivered

by Frank Dikötter (University of London/University of Hong Kong), who provided historical insights into the „Racialization of the Globe." Dikötter said that people commonly rely on three approaches to explain the persistence of racial systems. The „common sense approach" reflects the continued belief that races actually exist, a belief that has been widely discredited, although some scientific studies contribute to its persistence. The „imposition model" argues that Western notions of racism were exported to and imposed on non-western regions of the world. Proponents of the „diffusion model," on the other hand, believe that Western capitalism eventually replicates racial belief systems around the globe. According to Dikötter, the last two approaches suffer from serious shortcomings, since they are Euro-centrist, deny agency to non-European societies, and propagate a unilateral understanding of racism. Dikötter argued that an „appropriation model" would be much more useful for studying race, since it acknowledges that ideas, objects, and institutions can be understood in local terms and can be appropriated in different ways. In the global processes of appropriation, he said, politics and science played a crucial role. While political ideas of equality fostered the emergence of racial ideologies to justify difference, scientific discourses became the basis for systematic thinking about race. Dikötter stressed that the racial belief systems that these discourses produced were not only extremely flexible and malleable, but they also frequently overlapped and interacted with other belief systems, such as religion or class.

The second panel focused on racism and colonialism in Asia and Eastern Europe. Wolfgang Seifert (University of Heidelberg) explored the role of race in Japan's assimilation policy in occupied Korea between 1910 and 1945. Many historians, he said, equated Japan's pre-1945 history with that of Nazi Germany. Yet fascist Japan, while committing numerous atrocities, never planned genocide nor did it develop a racist ideology to justify such crimes. According to Seifert, Korea represents an important case study to probe the contradictions inherent in Japan's assimilation policies. Although notions of racial superiority existed in Japan, Japanese authorities stressed the similarities between Korea and Japan in terms of ethnic origin and culture. Japan not only considered assimilation of Koreans into Japanese society feasible but also desirable. In the end, however, assimilation turned out to be a veiled attempt to produce loyal Korean subjects, many of whom were discriminated against in both occupied Korea and Japan. Heinz-Dietrich Löwe (University of Heidelberg) focused on the Russian Empire's policy of assimilation toward ethnic minorities. Löwe argued that discrimination toward those minorities was a result of class animosities, not racism. In the case of Jews, for example, anti-Semitism metamorphosed into an anti-Western ideology that defiled Russian Jews as representatives of the country's unpopular modernization, not as an inferior race. Bolshevik authorities later perpetuated such class-based arguments, portraying Jews as representatives of the petty bourgeoisie. Even during the era of the Soviet Union, Löwe said, no articulated racial ideologies developed in the country.

The third panel provided insights into transnational racial ideologies in North America, Germany, and Australia. Claudia Bruns (University of Hildesheim) talked about the interrelations between North American racism and German anti-Semitism, using German intellectual Wilhelm Marr as a case study to explore the transfer of racial ideas across the Atlantic. Bruns criticized the common dichotomization between anti-black racism and anti-Semitism. The case of Marr, who is considered the founding father of German anti-Semitism, demonstrated how these two racial belief systems could intersect, overlap, and influence each other. Considered a radical democrat who had participated in the Revolution of 1848, Marr turned into a rabid anti-Semite after a ten-year stay in the United States and Central America. Adapting racial ideas to traditionally religious anti-Semitic discourses upon his return, Marr increasingly emphasized the innate biological differences that seemingly set Jews apart from other German citizens. John David Smith (University of North Carolina at Charlotte) also used a biographical approach to explore the influence of American racism on the thinking of Austrian

anthropologist Felix von Luschan. During a trip to America in 1914 and 1915, von Luschan sought to find laws in heredity by studying and measuring thousands of African American adults and children. Although he initially argued for genetic commonalities of all people, challenged notions of white supremacy, and believed that all „races" had some inferior traits, he supported eugenics to rid societies of seemingly inferior members and later abandoned non-racial anthropology. According to Smith, Luschan's trip to the United States exacerbated his racial thinking. In the panel's last paper, Dirk Moses (University of Sydney) explored racism in Australia in the age of the „War on Terror," arguing that incidents of anti-Arab violence in this country represented only the latest chapter in the „civilizing mission" of Western nations. Violence against „Indigenous Others" in the „War on Terror" may no longer be justified by articulated racial ideologies, Moses said, but official rhetoric replicated the traditional civilizing mission discourse and similarly imposed Western norms on them.

The fourth panel explored the differences and interrelationships between race, caste, and class. Harald Fischer-Tiné (Jacobs University of Bremen) explored what he called European convicts' „racial dividend" in Indian jails in the second half of the nineteenth century. Fischer-Tiné argued that European convicts clearly benefited from the racial hierarchies that British colonial authorities had established in India. Although the penal system could at times be extremely brutal for these „white subalterns," they tended to be more privileged than native prisoners, who received less food, were treated more harshly, and were sent to less hospitable regions of the country. Gita Dharampal-Frick (University of Heidelberg) explored the impact of Western concepts of race on Indian discourses on caste. First used by the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century, the term caste initially described many things, including ancestral origins. Notions of racial purity were not at the heart of this discourse. In the following centuries, however, Indians appropriated and adapted Western concepts of race, which contributed to the racialization of caste. In the panel's last paper, Urs Matthias Zachmann (University of Munich) attempted to refute the long-held idea that Japan adopted Western notions of race and racism in the nineteenth century. Biological concepts of race, Zachmann said, could not develop since the Japanese had long conceived of themselves as an „interracial" nation. More important, Western racial belief systems suggested that Japan was an inferior race, which limited the country's ability to develop a concept of racial superiority. Japan's vows to establish a Pan-Asian alliance with China owed less to genuinely held ideas about race than to opportunistic self-interest in the realm of international relations. Despite the apparent lack of racial concepts, minorities such as Chinese immigrants were seriously discriminated against.

The fifth panel explored the interconnections between racism, nationalism, and imperialism. Paul A. Kramer (Johns Hopkins University) talked about the interaction between racial politics in the United States and the nation's emergence as an imperial power in the twentieth century. According to Kramer, America's imperial engagement in the world led to „imperial reconstructions" of racial formations in the United States. After much debate about American imperialism, a „continentalist" approach, which stressed racial purity, space, and power, eventually dominated American foreign policy. However, according to Kramer, the contradictions inherent in this concept created the possibility for the emergence of a hegemonic anti-racism that contributed to the end of officially sanctioned racism in the United States. Christian Geulen (University of Koblenz) presented a paper on the intellectual and scholarly discourse on race in the twentieth century. Stressing the ambiguity of racial concepts, he argued that modern racial ideologies could not be reduced to mere biology. Rather such belief systems always included „culturalist" arguments that were just as destructive as biological determinism. Discussing how these cultural discourses affected racial ideologies propagated in Nazi Germany, Geulen called for a broader understanding of racism that takes seriously the interconnectedness of biology and culture. Christoph Marx (University of Essen) offered insights into the intellectual maturation of Hendrik Verwoerd, one of the most important

architects of apartheid in South Africa. Trained in psychology and sociology, Verwoerd spent some time studying in Germany in the 1920s, but according to Marx, he was not influenced by European theories about race and genetics. Rather Verwoerd, who entered politics in the 1930s, developed his own theory of cultural racism that viewed black South Africans as part of an inferior civilization that was incompatible with white civilization.

The last panel focused on race and racism in Asia and the Near East. Benjamin Braude (Boston College) argued that racism was a distinctly European phenomenon that did not develop in the Near East. According to Braude, Near Eastern languages did not use concepts of color to describe different groups, while Islamic religion stressed universalism, ideas that clearly differed from color-consciousness and emphasis on particularity that characterized Greek, Judaic, and Christian traditions. In addition, Islamic societies condoned „racially mixed" families if the offspring of such unions was raised as Muslims. While religion, among other factors, contributed to the recognition of group differences, Braude said, conflicts over these differences should not be interpreted as a consequence of racism. Gotelind Müller-Saini (University of Heidelberg) focused on Chinese concepts of race and the country's reactions to Western forms of racialization around 1900. Before Chinese contact with Western ideas about race, being Chinese was defined primarily in cultural terms. While racial concepts were not completely absent, such ideas were malleable and flexible. When learning that Western nations viewed the Chinese as a „yellow race," Chinese intellectuals debated whether such imposed designations should be rejected or adopted. Chinese nationalism and Japanese occupation contributed to a more pronounced use of western race theories in the twentieth century. Müller-Saini stressed, however, that China must be seen as an active agent that adapted western concepts of race rather than as a passive receiver of these concepts.

The final roundtable discussion began with comments by Boris Barth (University of Konstanz) and Manfred Berg (University of Heidelberg). Barth first made a few remarks about racism and genocide. Using a definition of genocide that stresses state-actors, murder, and the intention to kill, he argued that racism does not automatically lead to genocidal ideas, while some form of racism is always part of genocide. In his general comments on the conference, Barth noted that the problems of defining racism in a global context often reflected problems of translation. Barth also believed that scholars needed to study more closely the „missing link" between pre-colonial racism and modern racist anti-Semitism. Another key question that needed to be answered, he said, was the question why some societies developed racial belief systems while others did not. Manfred Berg stated that too narrow definitions of racism would be likely to exclude certain processes of racialization. Nevertheless, scholars should reflect on the analytical tensions between racial belief systems and racial practices when analyzing the global and transnational dimensions of racism. According to Berg, numerous papers of the conference had demonstrated that global perspectives were important, since they had called attention to the complex processes of appropriation that called into question simple impositions models. In terms of a future research agenda, Berg stressed the significance of biographical approaches that appeared to be the most promising method to probe the transnational diffusion of racial thinking.

During the subsequent discussion, the debate revolved primarily around the issue of definitions. Definitions of both genocide and racism were discussed at length. Many conference participants were skeptical as to whether one definition of race or racism could be found, since there were so many different exclusionary ideologies and practices in world history related to ideas of race. The roundtable discussion thus picked up on a key issue that was repeatedly raised during the conference. Indeed, as was pointed out by several conference participants, many racialized practices were never named racist, yet they were based on racialized worldviews. Some suggested that historians could focus on the interrelationship between racial practice and racial ideologies in moments of social and political crisis as one way to historicize the emergence of racist concepts. Another suggestion

was to distinguish between various degrees of racism. The discussion demonstrated that historians frequently lack an adequate vocabulary to describe various forms of group hatred.

Despite the difficulties that the conference participants encountered when discussing race and racism from comparative and transnational perspectives, the conference clearly sparked important conversations that are likely to produce further investigations into the global dimensions of this phenomenon. Revised versions of the conference papers will be published in a conference volume in early 2009.

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