

The Resilience of White Supremacy and Privilege

Veranstalter: Christine Knauer / Georg Schild, Sub-Project C03: A Myriad of Threats: American Race Relations after 1945, Collaborative Research Center 923 „Threatened Order“, University Tuebingen

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In 2008, Americans elected the first African American president in United States history. As whites longed to rid themselves of the stigma of racism and racial inequality, Obama's election seemed to manifest that white privilege had almost vanished and black advancement no longer faced serious barriers. Eight years after Obama's historic ascendance to the White House, the persistence of discrimination and racial inequality are all too blatantly visible. While police violence against African Americans is widely covered by the media, most forms of discrimination are more subtle but deeply systemic.

The resurgent racial tensions in the United States show the urgent necessity to think anew about the persistence of white privilege and the methods of racial ostracization, oppression, and violence in the United States. This workshop investigated the history of white supremacy and privilege since the New Deal. It brought together historians who work on white resistance against social change, studying how white Americans responded to the challenges of African American demands for equality and the end of de jure and de facto segregation in the United States. The workshop (re)assessed the various strategies used by whites, intentionally or inadvertently, to perpetuate white privilege and to fight, discredit, and immobilize the civil rights movement. As white supremacy and privilege have never been solely southerners issues, the workshop paid special attention to questions related to „southern exceptionalism“ and the myth of racial integration and equality in the North. Moreover, the papers

emphasized the intersectionality of white oppression.

The workshop commenced with a panel on the intersections of gender, sexuality, and race. DANIELLE MCGUIRE (Wayne State University) emphasized in her paper how black women's experiences of white sexual violence shaped the civil rights movement and their activism. While African American men were stereotyped as black rapists, black women were stigmatized as sexually available incubi. Since slavery, sexual violence against black women was ubiquitous. Dependent on the bus for transportation, black women especially fell victim to mistreatment and sexual assaults by bus drivers. Their protest and activism, McGuire showed, represented a claim to ownership and control over their bodies. Their testimonies against white rapists, whether successful or not, represented an act of defiance and empowerment.

While previous research on the massive resistance movement that fought against civil rights activists mostly focuses on males, REBECCA BRÜCKMANN (Berlin) shifted the focus to introduce white women with active roles. Using examples from Arkansas, Louisiana, and South Carolina, the paper revealed the diversity of activism among female segregationists and the powerful interplay of race, class, and gender. Massive resistance provided white supremacist women with an opportunity to act and manifested their claim to agency. Concurrently, their activism ultimately affirmed traditional gender ideals and class hierarchies. Viewing the movement as a means of upward mobility, female activists of the working class were often shunned for not embracing conventional notions of respectable behavior.

Using activists like Lorraine Hansberry, James Baldwin, and Bayard Rustin as examples, KEVIN MUMFORD (University of Illinois) examined the intersections of race and sexuality in a white supremacist and homophobic society. His paper had a methodological bent in discussing the issue of silences in the archives, as gay issues are often not readily apparent even in the preserved papers of homosexuals. Given the importance of race and sexual oppression, he discussed

how black gays struggled with their identity and position within the African-American community as well as the nation as a whole. They could not expect to receive support from the civil rights movement nor did the gay liberation movement show much interest in the racial dynamics of black homosexuality. Thus, the politics of recognition were difficult for these individuals with multiple overlapping minority identities.

The second panel provided a close look at racial violence in the South and its repercussions in the United States and worldwide. SILVAN NIEDERMEIER (Erfurt) opened the session by exploring cases of police torture of African Americans in the South, and the federal government's inability and frequent unwillingness to interfere during the 1940s and early 1950s. He made a compelling case for interpreting police torture and violence as part of a longer tradition of racial violence, especially lynchings, in the United States. White policemen in the South used physical and psychological violence to force alleged black criminals to confess their crimes. Although the NAACP pushed for federal intervention and the FBI investigated numerous cases, police officers were seldom prosecuted, let alone convicted. Niedermeier showed that the testimonies of blacks to the FBI and in court nevertheless represented an act of defiance and resistance to torture and legal discrimination, no matter how unsuccessful. In the panel's second paper, CHRISTINE KNAUER (Tuebingen) examined how the nation and Washington reacted to lynchings after the Second World War in general and, more importantly, how white southerners reacted to, talked about, and made sense of lynchings and their repercussions. Using a quadruple lynching in Georgia in 1946 as an example, the paper showed how white southerners needed to contextualize this gruesome deed in order to regain control over the public narrative, to salvage the image of the South prevent punitive consequences for the South with its racial order and customs. Narratives that reframed issues of police torture and lynching represented a powerful tool to maintain white supremacy and privilege.

The workshop's first day closed with the keynote lecture by HEATHER ANN THOMP-

SON (University of Michigan) on policing, the prison system, and race. The historian, activist, and political advisor provided a powerful critique of hyper-policing and mass incarceration, both deeply rooted in white supremacy and privilege. Policies such as the „War on Crime“ and „Stop and Frisk“ are mostly geared against people of color, as is the „War on Drugs“ that President Ronald Reagan started in 1982 and Bill Clinton escalated during his presidency. African American men are exponentially more likely to be imprisoned or killed by the police; so are black women. The deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner and Tanesha Anderson represent only the tip of the iceberg. Thompson argued that today's policing and mass incarceration had its roots in 1965 and the War on Crime. Rather than being a necessity this new policy was a choice and a bipartisan effort that created false perceptions about supposed urban crises to justify hyper-policing. What followed was a further increase in the criminalization of black and brown men and women and their incarceration. The fallout from this orphans children, impoverishes families and communities, and ultimately creates more violence. White privilege becomes regularized by policing. Furthermore, the majority of incarcerated people cannot vote, as 48 out of 50 states have a disfranchisement law for felons on the books. This represents one structural reason why the people most affected are largely devoid of power to elicit substantial change. Felons are also barred from public social benefits and housing, parental rights, employment opportunities, as well as jury duty. A lively discussion ensued that deepened the audience's understanding of the current prison system's historical roots in slavery and disfranchisement as well as the economic interests that support the persistence of mass incarceration. The discussion also investigated possible solutions. Thompson underlined the importance of a bipartisan effort to establish treatment centers for drug addiction as well as mental illness in order to begin to address the problems at hand. As long as businesses and individuals make enormous amounts of money from hyper-policing and mass incarceration, change will be difficult to attain. Nonetheless, the discussion revealed

the power of social media in raising awareness of the issue.

On the second day, the third panel dealt with questions of race in regional contexts but also the spatiality of race in urban settings. BENJAMIN HOUSTON (Newcastle University) opened the panel with an analysis of racial interaction in Nashville, Tennessee, a case study of how race relations changed and did not change during the civil rights movement. The paper emphasized the importance of regional diversity of Jim Crow. Nashville, Houston showed, was a fitting example of the power and randomness of the racial etiquette that Jim Crow imposed on whites and blacks in daily interaction: embedding class, race and gender divisions and contradictions among the population, but also dictating a culture of segregation. As the civil rights movement evolved, so did white resistance which, in operating from this acculturated mentality, devised broader ways of dictating control over segregated space. Using highway construction and urban renewal, the white elite reshaped an entire city to manifest racial hierarchies anew and create separate spaces for blacks and whites. Calling it a northernization of Nashville, Houston exposed how seemingly color-blind public policy decisions ultimately re-strengthened segregation.

The workshop's last paper by JASON SOKOL (University of New Hampshire) highlighted this perpetuation of systemic racial inequality in the North by examining the racial situation in Massachusetts. Sokol deconstructed the „northern mystique“ that masked and obscured the persistence of inequality and segregation in a region of the country that views itself as „a beacon of equality and freedom.“ Equality at the voting booth and the rhetoric of color-blindness ruled, veiling systemic segregation and massive resistance in Boston and similar northern communities. Using the political life and work of Edward Brooke, the first African American directly elected to the Senate, Sokol showed how Brooke offered white voters an alternate reality that smoothed over issues of racial inequality. He revealed how Brooke and his campaign spoke to the white electorate's ideas about their own color-blindness,

even as that attitude too often inhibited black progress and preserved white privilege and diverted attention from the urgent necessity for change.

The workshop closed with a plenary discussion in which the participants stressed the need to further investigate and problematize southern exceptionalism and the continued lack of awareness of white supremacy and privilege in the North. Questioning its pedagogical usefulness, Heather Ann Thompson criticized the efficacy and purpose of the very notion of southern exceptionalism. Rather than asking where racism was worse, she argued, historians should ask how race worked—and works—in different places. Collectively, participants raised questions about the arbitrary geographical definitions of South and North. They agreed on the necessity of questioning established categories in order to open up discussions and refrain from „pointing fingers.“ A member of the audience raised the question of pedagogy, of how to teach race and white privilege to white students in the South, which prompted an extensive discussion. Speaking from her experience as a teacher and advisor on racial equality, Danielle McGuire argued that white students in the North were less enlightened about white privilege than southerners due to their belief that they lived in a place where race and racism were not an issue. German teachers in the audience added a discussion about similar issues derived from teaching American race relations in Germany. Historians, the participants concurred, had a special responsibility to teach white privilege in all its blatant and hidden forms to white audiences to build a more solid understanding and foundation for change.

Conference Overview:

Introduction:

Georg Schild (Universität Tübingen)

Ewald Frie (CRC 923)

Panel I: Gender, Sexuality, and Race

Danielle McGuire (Wayne State University): Race, Rape and Resistance: Sexual Violence in the Civil Rights Movement

Rebecca Brückmann (Freie Universität Berlin): Segregation's Southern Belles: Gen-

der Idea(l)s and Women's Activities in
Massive Resistance

Kevin J. Mumford (University of Illinois):
Black Gay Lives Matter: Racism and Homo-
phobia from the March on Washington to the
AIDS Crisis

Panel II: Race, Violence, and Control

Silvan Niedermeier (Universität Erfurt):
„None of Washington's Business“: Police
Torture, Civil Rights Activism and White
Resistance in the American South (1930-1955)

Christine Knauer (CRC 923): The Horrors of
Lynching: White Southerners and Lynching
after 1945

Keynote Lecture

Heather Ann Thompson (University of Michi-
gan): Baltimore is Burning: The Long Crisis of
Race, Policing and Prisons in the U.S.

Panel III: Race, Space, and Region

Benjamin Houston (Newcastle University):
Jim Crow's Shadow: Segregated Space in
Nashville - Then and Now

Jason Sokol (University of New Hampshire):
Edward Brooke, Black Politics, and the North-
ern Mystique

Panel IV: Final Discussion

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macy and Privilege*. 07.06.2015–09.06.2015, Tue-
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