

Historicizing „Whiteness“ in Eastern Europe and Russia

Veranstalter: Catherine Baker, University of Hull; Agnieszka Kościńska, University of Warsaw; Bogdan Iacob / James Mark, University of Exeter

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Eastern Europe has long held a position of ambivalence as a region that is, at once, Europe and its periphery. In this conference, scholars grappled with the idea of Eastern European whiteness in this context, understanding this racial formation as a source of authority, yet only half granted. Few scholars heretofore have engaged with the concept of „whiteness“ as a core component for understanding the history of East European identity and the region’s relationship with Western Europe and the world. The aim of the workshop was to understand this absence, and to discuss these questions for Eastern Europe since the mid-19th century. Held at the Institute of Political Research in Bucharest, the conference was connected with the film festival *Socialist Worlds on Screen: Beyond Black and White*, which presented an exciting range of films inspired by ideas of revolution, national liberation, and solidarity between socialist Eastern Europe and the Global South. The two events were organized by the international project *Socialism Goes Global: Cold War Connections between the „Second“ and „Third“ Worlds*, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Council.¹

ANIKÓ IMRE’s (Los Angeles) keynote address centered on the question how to make whiteness visible? She discussed various features that have shaped East European whiteness, including the racial exceptionalism that has enabled East Europeans to benefit from the privileges associated with whiteness without suffering the „white guilt“ of imperialism and slavery. She argued in favor of historicizing and globalizing whiteness to better understand the means by which it was constituted in the region, and the ways that East Europeans have and continue to participate in networks of white supremacy.

The first panel took up the theme of Eastern Europe’s relationship to colonialism from the late 19th century to the 1960s. MONIKA BOBAKO (Poznań) analyzed Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* from a Polish perspective. Shedding light on five problem areas in Polish history that reveal the ambiguous relationship of Poles to whiteness, Bobako proposed that the „white mask“ in Poland has potential to mean two very different things: the adoption of western neo-liberalism as a means to increase solidarity and belonging in Europe and a nationalism founded on the contestation of the neo-colonialism of the liberal west, suggesting that assimilation, emancipation, and nationalist particularism as they relate to Polishness may be inflected with racial thinking.

As part of a larger critical reflection on knowledge production, ZOLTÁN GINELLI (Budapest) explored the various ways that Hungarians engaged with Native American („Indian“) culture and connected it in different ways to the semi-peripheral coloniality of Hungary and Hungarians in the world after 1920, and later in the socialist state. He showed that the appropriation and fetishization of Native American culture and the positioning of Hungarian history and Hungarians in relation to Native Americans help reveal the selective racisms and anticolonialism of Hungary as it related to the country’s semi-peripherality.

MARIANNA SZCZYGIELSKA (Berlin) traced Polish encounters with elephant hunting and ivory through the lens of whiteness, class, and gender. After a brief exploration of ivory, she discussed the ways in which Polish upper class men participated in hunting, which enabled them to reinforce their status and gender identities as gentlemen and align themselves with European modernity and whiteness versus the blackness of Africans.

The second panel explored questions of race, religion, and gender. KRISTÍNA ČAJKOVIČOVÁ (Brno) focused on how the so-called Gypsy question was part of a discourse through which knowledge about the Roma was produced from „above“ and, at the same time, helped reproduce and main-

¹ <http://socialismgoesglobal.exeter.ac.uk/conferences/>.

tain the racial hierarchies of Czechoslovakia during the normalization period. She traced how the transformation of the gender and sexuality regime also shaped attitudes and cultural narratives and policies surrounding Roma in socialist Czechoslovakia, cementing their identity as a racialized—and non-white—„other“ deviating from the norms of the Czechoslovak collectivity.

BOLAJI BALOGUN (Leeds) explored whiteness through interviews with black and mixed-race persons living in contemporary Poland. He concluded that Polishness—including both people and the social structure—has been mediated through the conceptualization of race. Further, whiteness has been used to determine who is Polish and who is not and appears to be loosely correlated to behavioral preferences that may significantly affect the lives of people of color in Poland.

CĂTĂLIN BERESCU (Bucharest) discussed pro-Roma activism and the ways that attitudes towards Roma are shifting in contemporary Romania. Experienced in activism related to housing discrimination and ghettoization, Berescu explained the ambiguities of pro-Roma activism that may simultaneously address pressing needs but also reproduce marginalization and/or otherness. He also discussed how the changing racialization of Roma and the shift to a white/black binary have affected internal Roma relations.

The final panel of the day explored whiteness in relation to anti-Semitism. Starting with recent proclamations regarding Hungary's (and Poland's) claims as protectors of Christian Europe, PAUL HANEBRINK (New Brunswick) examined one strain of the genealogy of the relationship between Christianity and Whiteness in East Central Europe: the judeo-bolshevik myth. He argued that although contemporary Islamophobia and interwar anti-Semitism were different in important ways, the emergence of judeo-bolshevism played an important role in developing a racialized (Eastern) European identity accessible to the countries who did not directly engage in overseas empire building. Hanebrink also posited that the links between whiteness and Christian civilization cultivated in contemporary Poland and Hungary have al-

lowed these countries to shed their peripheral identity and instead assert themselves as Europe's last hope for survival.

Moving backward chronologically, RAUL CARSTOCEA (Leicester) analyzed the ambiguous identification of Jews as both a „backward,“ „oriental“ minority subject to discrimination and a colonizing group exploiting the majority Romanian population starting in the 19th century. He concluded that the (racial) „other“ changed depending on the question: social, national, Eastern. In so doing, he showed how key elements of the European colonizing project were applied in Europe itself.

In the opening paper of the panel, „Eastern European Whiteness in Global Perspective,“ DUŠAN I. BJELIĆ (Orono) compared Mexico and the Balkans to analyze the links between race and nation building prior to WWII. He argued that the significance of eugenics in both regions created the potential for „whitening.“ Bjelić also posited that both regions shared similarities in their national formation, which was fully racialized in ways that promoted whiteness as the preservation of an older ethnic core.

CATHERINE BAKER (Hull) moved the conversation to more recent events and analyzed the place of the Yugoslav Wars in contemporary transnational white supremacist violence. Using examples related to the Christchurch massacre among others, she demonstrated how contemporary white supremacists and anti-Islamic activists have actively drawn links between themselves and Serbian nationalist figures and political discourses from the 1990s to position themselves as the protectors of European Christian civilization.

In her paper on diasporic whiteness, ŠPELA DRNOVŠEK ZORKO (Warwick) investigated the links between diasporic post-socialist and post-colonial identities in contemporary Britain. Using interviews as her source base, she explained how diasporic identities provided, at times, a bridge between immigrants from Africa and the West Indies and those from East Central Europe. Yet she also showed that the ability of Eastern European migrants to claim whiteness—even as recent immigrants—tugs at these potential solidari-

ties.

IRINA NOVIKOVA (Riga) analyzed the place of race in Soviet films from the 1920s to the 1960s. Drawing attention to the role that both story and technology played in producing or highlighting racial difference, she demonstrated the ambiguous messages advanced by films that, at times, reinforced white/black hierarchies even as official discourse promoted internationalism and a potential alternative—Soviet whiteness—while decrying American racism.

Returning to the topic of race and wildlife, ZSUZSANNA VARGA (Budapest) explored the 1971 Hunting Expo in Hungary. She argued that socialist-era Hungarians paid little attention to the anti-black racism encoded in global wildlife conservation movements. She also explained that participating in conservation and game management allowed Hungarians—as socialist subjects—to tap into whiteness, elite masculinity, and Europeanness constitutive of the colonizing project in Africa.

Taking up the revolutions of 1989, JAMES MARK (Exeter) showed how East Central Europe’s „return“ to Europe had important repercussions for the more explicit racialization of white European identity. Of particular importance was the discrediting of „multicolored“ socialism, the abandonment of support for anti-racism in the international sphere, and growing right-wing white resentment towards a western club that had, through multiculturalism, seemed to have abandoned a commitment to a white world. He concluded by questioning the sincerity of socialist commitment to internationalism and anti-racism—in part due to the reluctance to link local and international issues of discrimination—and showed how quickly those dimensions of socialist culture were abandoned.

In the final panel, BOGDAN G. POPA (Cambridge) examined how ideas about Romanian ethnicity communicated a distinct form of racialization as it related to both other Europeans as well as to its own internal hierarchies. This racialized identity reflected Romanian’s longer history of empire and subjugation. By drawing attention to the dynamism of Romanian racial formation in a global racial analysis, he suggested that such an analysis holds the potential of revealing

the complexity of ethnic alliances in the past and the future.

Shifting focus to Albania, CHELSI WEST OHUERI (Austin) discussed Balkan Egyptians, who have articulated an identity that distinguishes them from Roma and traces their ethnic roots to (black) Africa. By outlining efforts of the Egyptian minority to seek recognition and human rights, as well as inclusion in national development, Ohuери showed how this small group struggling for visibility in Albania opens questions of how blackness and whiteness are defined and asserted.

Lastly, KASIA NARKOWICZ (Gloucestershire) examined the concept of „Muselmanner“ (literally Muslim), a term used among prisoners in National Socialist camps to identify prisoners who were likely to die. She suggested that a critical analysis of the term may provide insight into contemporary Islamophobia. Pointing to the potential for comparisons between the often contradictory formulations of the „Muselmanner“ from camps and Muslims in contemporary Europe, Narkowicz concluded that this concept holds analytical potential for understanding the racism embedded in European liberalism.

Conference overview:

Keynote

Anikó Imre (Los Angeles): Colorblind Nationalisms

Panel 1. Colonialism and Imagining the Self in Eastern Europe

Monika Bobako (Poznań): White Skin, White Masks. Re-reading Frantz Fanon from Eastern European Perspective

Zoltán Ginelli (Budapest): Hungarian Indians: Racial and Anti-colonial Solidarity in Post-Trianon Hungary

Marianna Szczygielska (Berlin): Engendering Wildlife and Whiteness: Elephants, Ivory and Zoos (1870s-1940s)

Panel 2. Eastern European Whiteness and the Other: Race, Religion and Gender

Kristína Čajkovičová (Brno): Shifting to the Gadžo Question: The Role of Racialized Sexuality in the Process of Czechoslovak Collec-

tivity

Bolaji Balogun (Leeds): Whiteness—A Mechanism that Sustains Polishness

Cătălin Berescu (Bucharest): White Savior, Black Savior: Pro-Roma Activists in Search of an Identity

Panel 3. Anti-Semitism and Whiteness in Eastern Europe

Paul Hanebrink (New Brunswick): Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and the Anti-Communist Legacy in Contemporary Eastern Europe

Raul Carstocea (Leicester): Ambiguous Whiteness and the Anti-Semitic Imagination: Jews in Eastern Europe between Colonised and Colonisers

Panel 4. Eastern European Whiteness in Global Perspective

Dušan I. Bjelić (Orono): Transnational Analysis of Mexico and the Balkans: Racial Formations of Nations

Catherine Baker (Hull): The Yugoslav Wars and Transnational White Nationalist Historical Narratives

Špela Drnovšek Zorko (Warwick): Re-routing East European Socialism, Historicising Diasporic Whiteness

Panel 5. Socialism as Ambivalent Whiteness

Irina Novikova (Riga): „White Gaze“ in the USSR?—„Race“ and Technology in the Soviet Films of the 1920s-1960s (from Lev Kuleshov to Mark Donskoi)

Zsuzsanna Varga (Budapest): Hungarians and White Privilege in Africa: The World Hunting Expo of 1971

James Mark (Exeter): A Revolution of Whiteness? 1989 and the Politics of Race

Panel 6. Liminality, Post-Socialism, and Eastern European Whiteness

Bogdan G. Popa (Cambridge): „We Belong to a Great Race, the Dacian Race“: Slavery and the Construction of an Anti-colonial White Race in Romanian Historiography

Chelsi West Ohueri (Austin): The Jevg Factor:

An Exploration of Whiteness, Blackness, and Racialized Identities in Albania

Kasia Narkowicz (Gloucestershire): The „Muselmanner“ as the Ultimate Other

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